

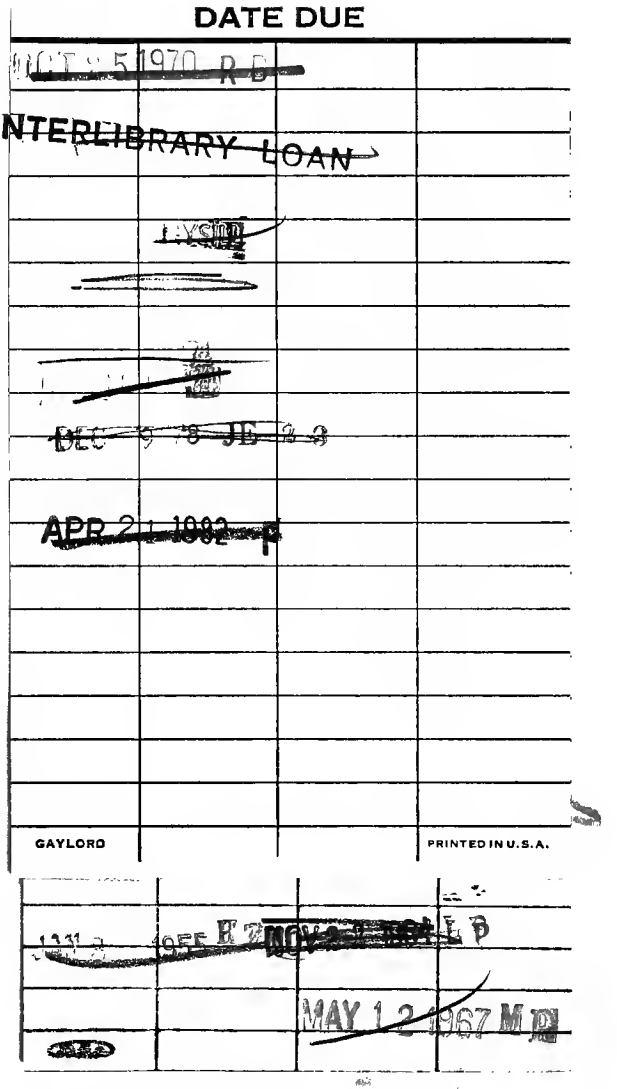
A STUDY OF HAMLET

F. A. MARSHALL

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A STUDY OF HAMLET.

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STUDY OF HAMLET.

BY

FRANK A. MARSHALL.

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B

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Dedication.

ON THE TOMB OF HIM,

WHO WAS AT ONCE

ENGLAND'S AND MANKIND'S GREATEST POET,

I LAY THIS HUMBLE OFFERING:

WELL KNOWING THAT IT LACKS MUCH IN MERIT,

BUT HOPING THAT SOME OF ITS FAULTS MAY BE ATONED FOR

BY THE LOVE AND REVERENCE WHICH INSPIRED IT.

PREFACE.

—o—

"WHAT! another book on 'Hamlet!'" I seem to hear many, both critics and students of Shakespeare, exclaim with somewhat of a jaded air. "What can you have that is new to say about 'Hamlet?'" they ask—not unreasonably. My answer is that I hope I have something to say which is worth hearing, whether it be quite new, or whether it be old truths presented in a new guise; though I must confess I have not hazarded any theories, or indulged in any criticisms, simply because I thought they were new. To those who seek for abstruse verbal commentaries, or for ingenious, but, to my mind, paltry attempts to nibble away our greatest poet's reputation, this book will not be welcome. I leave to others the task of treating our author like a prisoner arrested for felony, of turning his pockets inside out, and stripping him to the skin, in order to see if they can discover a rag or two which might have belonged to some one else.

Those I would fain have as my readers are those who love Shakespeare as one who has added to the beauty and happiness of life; who reverence his mind as one of those precious gifts of God to this world, whence beings, born of Fancy indeed, but none the less real in their nobleness and purity, may spring, to gladden the hearts of those whose earthly lot it is to find few friends save in the realms of imagination. These persons

will grudge neither time nor trouble if, by their own efforts, or by the aid of others, they can gain a clearer insight into the beauties of Shakespeare's creations.

This book had its origin in a lecture which I was asked to give before the Catholic Young Men's Association. I chose "Hamlet" for my subject; but I found it impossible to say what I wanted to say in the space even of two lectures. The greater portion of the First and Second Parts of this work formed the matter of those lectures. It was always my ambition to give a series of lectures on Shakespeare, accompanied with readings; but I have learnt to doubt my capacity for such a task. Though I have studied "Hamlet" more or less for the last fourteen years, I never knew, till I began seriously to finish this work, how scanty was my knowledge of the grand subject I had undertaken to illustrate. One of my principal objects will have been gained, if I can induce any of my readers to study the text of Shakespeare's plays more carefully, and with a higher aim than mere verbal criticism; they will find that he is himself his best commentator, and that such study will open to them new fields of enjoyment.

I have made frequent allusions to the acting of three of the most distinguished representatives of Hamlet on the stage that I have had the pleasure of seeing—namely, Tommaso Salvini, Ernesto Rossi, and Henry Irving. I had intended to have entered into a somewhat elaborate comparison of their respective interpretations of the character; but for many reasons, some of which I will mention, I thought it better not to do so. Signor Salvini has as yet only appeared in a version of the play, so unsatisfactory to an English student of Shakespeare, that it would be scarcely possible to do justice to his great talents as displayed in the part of Hamlet; the more especially as he intends to give us the privilege of seeing him in a fuller and more faithful translation. Signor Rossi has yet to appear before an English public; he also may be enabled to correct some of the deficiencies of the

version, which he uses in Italy, before he encounters the criticism of Shakespeare's countrymen. Mr. Irving has exchanged Hamlet for another Shakespearian *rôle*, after having given the almost incredible number of two hundred consecutive representations of the part: it was inevitable that his performance should suffer from so fatiguing a persistence in it, and I trust, for the sake of art, such a call may never again be made on his strength. Acting is an art which cannot be preserved in any perfection, unless the actor has the opportunity of changing, not unfrequently, the character which he represents. If a painter were to spend a year in painting the same subject over and over again, he would lose most of whatever skill he ever possessed; his delicacy of touch would be seriously impaired; his colouring would be apt to grow coarse and careless; while his artistic perception would be diminished, and his power of execution would be worn away by very weariness. Art must have variety, or it pines and becomes cramped. I have ventured to make these remarks because the opinion I have incidentally expressed, in different parts of this work, of Mr. Irving's Hamlet was formed in the course of his first twenty performances; and, judging by the portion that I saw of his two-hundredth performance, I should say that the prolonged strain on his powers had told prejudicially on his execution of what was, undeniably, a singularly fine conception of the character. The charming grace, and melodious elocution, of Signor Salvini could not be obscured by the fact that he was under the disadvantage of speaking a language, with which but very few of his audience were familiar: he has, by his performance of Othello and Hamlet, won a position among Englishmen, as an interpreter of Shakespeare, which few of our own countrymen have gained. Ernesto Rossi, whose style is totally different*

* A writer in the *Times*, speaking of Rossi's Othello, as given in Paris, said that the two great Italian actors were as similar in style as Phelps

from that of Salvini, though he is in grace and talent his most worthy rival, will be sure of a generous welcome: his appearance amongst us will stimulate that revived interest in Shakespeare's plays which has been such a marked feature of the last year. As far as regards the Hamlet of the three great actors I have named, I should say that Salvini's interpretation was the most tender, Rossi's the most passionate, and Irving's the most intellectual.

Now that it has been proved that the plays of Shakespeare can be made to bring money as well as glory to the managers, I live in the hopes of seeing some performances of our greatest dramatist's masterpieces worthy of the honour in which we hold him. I do not mean as regards scenery and dresses, but as regards the representation of the characters themselves; one good actor cannot make an efficient cast; and unless the minor characters in Shakespeare's plays are adequately represented, it is impossible to form any just conception of the excellence of his work. This can only be effected by actors, managers, and audiences, uniting together in making greater sacrifices to Art than they have hitherto seemed willing to do.

The text from which I have quoted throughout is the "Cambridge Shakespeare." All the references are to that edition, which I cannot praise too highly. The text of the Quarto 1603, which I have used, is that contained in Allen's Reprint, entitled "The Devonshire 'Hamlets,'" in which the Quartos of 1603 and 1604 are exactly reprinted in facsimile side by side. It is a most valuable book. I have exercised all possible care in the revision of the letterpress, especially of the quotations. For what few mistakes have still crept in I crave pardon.

---

and Macready. I never saw Macready, but I am sure that all, who have seen Rossi and Salvini in the part, will admit that there could scarcely be two more dissimilar interpretations of Hamlet.

The three first Parts have been in print for some time ; various circumstances prevented my finishing the work, and delayed its publication. I hope I have succeeded in availing myself to some extent of the more important additions that have been made to Shakespearian criticism, especially as regards "Hamlet," since I began my task. I do not profess to have read all, or nearly all, that has been published on the subject ; but I can honestly say that the number of works referred to in the course of this book does not include one half of those I have consulted.

It only remains for me to thank most sincerely those friends, some of them men whose names are honoured in literature, who have helped me with their advice and encouragement. To Mr. Frederic Broughton, who has given me most valuable and timely aid in the revision of the work, I owe especial thanks. I also may perhaps be allowed to express my gratitude to my amanuensis, Mr. G. J. White, who, though suffering from a long and painful illness, has by his care and intelligence in verifying quotations and authorities, and in the laborious collation* of the first Quarto (1603) with the text of the Cambridge edition, been of invaluable service to me.

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* *See* Foot-note, page 163,

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ERRATA.

Page 24, Line 26, (in quotation) for "*to*" read "*in.*"
,, 24, ,, 42, (do. do.) dele "*and*" after "*waving.*"
,, 41, ,, 7, dele *comma* after "*all-powerful.*"
,, 63, ,, 42 and 43, for "*four first*" read "*first four.*"
,, 95, ,, 42, after "*ceremony*" insert *comma.*
,, 99, ,, 3, (in quotation) for "*splenetive*" read "*splenitive.*"
,, 102, ,, 21, for "*their*" read "*those.*"
,, 115, ,, 3, for "*Wittenburg*" read "*Wittenberg.*"
,, 115, Foot-note, for do. read do.
,, 136, Line 39, after "*page*" insert "120."
,, 137, ,, 9, for "*page* 8" read "*page* 120."
,, 158, ,, 2, after "*transitions*" insert *comma.*
,, 158, ,, 3, after "*Hamlet's*" insert *comma.*

Note.—In the table of "Contents," page xv, at Appendix M, the words "omitted in the Cambridge Edition" do not mean "omitted only in that edition;" the scene referred to, as is well known, being omitted in all the Quartos and Folios, except the Quarto 1603.

A STUDY OF HAMLET.

PART I.

"HAMLET" is perhaps the most popular of all Shakespeare's plays. Nearly all people have either read it, or seen it upon the stage, more than once. I will not say that it is the one most often quoted, yet perhaps the quotations taken from it are the best known of any of those lines of Shakespeare which have become household words. I do not think it is difficult to understand the universal popularity of this play; if we do not all agree in considering it Shakespeare's greatest work, it certainly is his most human; though less pathetic than "Othello," less sublime than "Macbeth," less touching than "Lear," it is certainly of all his tragedies the one which appeals most widely to human sympathy; because the character of Hamlet has more in common with all mankind than any other hero. His very weakness, which has been so severely censured by some critics, is greatly the cause of this; for most tragic heroes are endowed with such gigantic intellect, and monstrous passions, as to place them beyond both the understanding and the sympathy of ordinary mortals. Deeply as we are moved by the agonising jealousy of Othello, freely as we weep with Lear over the body of the loving Cordelia, instinctively as we shudder with Macbeth at the unearthly apparitions which so mysteriously control his fate, few of us ever feel that Othello, or Lear, or Macbeth, might be our very own self; but when Hamlet speaks, it seems as if thoughts and feelings, long pent up in us, had found their most natural utterance: the least philosophical comprehends his philosophy; the least melancholy muses sadly with him over the mysteries of life; the least humorous of us smiles

with him as odd fancies and playful satire break forth from him in the midst of the most tragic surroundings.

No doubt the question of suicide might be debated more learnedly, certainly more sensationally, than in the celebrated soliloquy of Hamlet: but if philosophers and novelists were to try their very utmost, they never could express more clearly, more vividly, certainly not more beautifully, than Shakespeare has in those few lines, the struggles of a mind weighed down by the sense that the burden imposed upon it was too heavy to bear.

The popularity of "Hamlet" is the more remarkable when we consider how subordinate in it is what we commonly call the "*love* interest." Few plays except Shakespeare's have retained their hold upon the popular mind either on the stage or in the study, the principal motive of which has not been, in some form or other, the love of man for woman, or of woman for man. In Hamlet the chief motive is filial affection; one which I hope will always inspire the deepest and most general sympathy; but which, it would be idle to deny, exercises a less powerful charm over the vulgar mind than that more selfish, and intrinsically less noble affection which sometimes threatens to monopolise the name of Love. If for no other reason, I should be deeply grieved to see the character of Hamlet losing any of its hold upon the minds of my contemporaries, and especially of the young; for if there is any one of the natural affections which the rapidly advancing steam-engine of improvement seems likely to improve off the face of the earth, it is that most holy, unselfish, and noble affection—an affection rooted in humility and in a single-minded sense of duty; incompatible alike with intellectual pride, or with enervating self-indulgence—the affection of a son for his father. No one can ever hope to appreciate Hamlet who does not cherish unsullied within his soul, in youth, in maturity, and in old age, that reverential love of parents which is the foundation-stone of all social virtue.

The intense love and worship which Hamlet feels for the memory of his father, mark him out, on his very first entrance, as alone in the crowd of courtiers around him; alone, too, even in the presence of those who should have loved and revered that memory as highly, if not more highly, than Hamlet himself. The noble excess of his love tends, hardly less than the inherent weakness of his character, to paralyse his capacity for action when it is most needed: of this I shall have to speak more fully, and I will now pass on

to notice briefly those other points in the character of Hamlet which ensure him the sympathy of mankind.

As I have said before, the very weakness of Hamlet makes us love him the more, because it brings him nearer to our own level. Who has not known what it is to feel life, with its glorious opportunities, slipping away from us day by day, without bringing us any nearer the fulfilment of some great duty, or the execution of some noble purpose, to which either the example, or the exhortation, of others, or the voice of our own conscience has called us? It may be by the death-bed of some very dear one; it may be in the wearying discipline of some long illness; it may be in the close and earnest contemplation of the evils around us, that we hear the first sound of the voice that calls us to sacrifice our ease, and our pleasures, for the sake of righting some wrong, or destroying some abuse, to the full heinousness of which our minds have been roused. Perhaps, like Hamlet, we sit down and contemplate the horrid features of the monster, till the very acuteness of the pain and disgust, which such a contemplation inspires, obtaining complete mastery over our feelings, and occupying our thoughts to the exclusion of almost any other subject, gradually wears away our energies, without their finding vent in that prompt and decided action which alone, as we know, can accomplish the great end we have set before us. In this state of mind, the *desire* to act is never lost; it is only the *power* to do so which is swallowed up in excess of feeling. Another state is when we simply content ourselves with exclaiming against the injustice and wickedness of the world in general, or of some persons in particular, but weakly decline to act, from despair at the magnitude of the labour involved in any attempt to remedy the evils to which we cannot blind ourselves. In such a state of mind we might slightly alter the words of Hamlet—

> "The world is out of joint, oh cursed spite!
> *But I* was never born to set it right."

To this canker of cowardice, which blights the lives of so many in whom great sensibility is coupled with indolence, and in whom the reflective part of the mind is morbidly developed at the expense of the executive part—it is to this that Hamlet alludes in the words—

> That craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event,
> A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdom,
> And ever three parts coward.

This weakness may be developed into a worse form, till it

assumes the most repulsive of all shapes, that impotent snarling cynicism, which yaps like a cur at the heels of every wrong-doer, but never attempts to help the wronged.

One feature in the character of Hamlet, which most attracts us, is his keen sympathy with all that is good, his contempt for what is mean and evil; this he shows without regard of place or person; and it is more admirable in a prince, whose temptations to acquiesce in things as they are, and to accept the world's standard of right and wrong, are greater than those of one in a lower station of life.

The fidelity which Hamlet shows to his friends, few indeed, but chosen for their merit alone; as well as the dignified courtesy, with which he treats all but those whom he knows to be practising some treachery towards him, add to the affection with which we regard him.

I will here allude to one other circumstance of his condition, which appeals to the sympathy of many readers of this tragedy—I mean the uncongeniality from which it is manifest, the moment he enters on the stage, that Hamlet suffers. I do so merely to warn the younger amongst you against allowing a natural sympathy for one, whose surroundings are most distasteful and antagonistic to his own feelings, to develope itself into that most mischievous of all morbid fancies—a belief that we are superior to all around us; that we are crushed by want of sympathy in our associates; that we are wasting our energies and talents on work which is far too dull and insignificant for us; that, in order to prove our superiority to the persons and circumstances among which our lot is cast, we ought to assume a gloomy dignity of manner; to shun this uncongenial society, though it be the only society within our reach; and vent our pent-up feelings in dismal and foolish verses, or in unwholesome and tedious exposition of our own misery; till we succeed in exalting our wretched selves into as corrupt and mischievous idols as it is in the power of man to create. No doubt it would be very pleasant if we all could live with persons whose tastes were similar to our own; who never differed with us in opinion; who never, morally, trod on our corns; among circumstances which never jarred upon our feelings, and duties, which were no less delightful than obligatory to perform. But the world was not made according to every one's fancy; and we must accept it as it is, with its sorrows, and its uncongenialities, and its duties, however unpleasant they may be. I do not know any phase of character, short of that of the merest sensualist, into which I would more warn the

young against drifting, than that of the interesting victim of uncongeniality. It is bad enough in women, it is worse in men, because it saps all capacity for practical usefulness in life. If your mind, if your tastes, be superior to those of your friends, relations, and companions, show it by an increase of courtesy, of amiability, towards them; and you will find none, or few, to dispute your superiority. If your duties be distasteful, even repulsive to you, so long as they are your duties, fulfil them as perfectly and as cheerfully as you can; and perhaps in good time you will find yourself raised to higher ones more worthy of the talents which you may possess: but to walk about with your nose in the air, and to furnace forth sighs—like a self-exhausting wind-bag—to despise those about you simply because you imagine yourself better than them, and to neglect your duties because you think yourself too good for them, can end in nothing else but in earning for you the contempt, if not the detestation, of your companions, and in convincing your employers, whoever they may be, that you are not fit for any duties at all.

Briefly then, I would attribute the popularity of this play not only to the inherent interest of the story and the dramatic skill with which, in spite of many blemishes of construction, it is developed; but even more to the sympathetic character of Hamlet himself: sympathetic, because he has more in common with mankind than any other tragic hero; because the motives of his conduct, the idiosyncrasies of his nature, the very blemishes which mar his virtues, his strength of feeling, his weakness in action, all alike endear his character to us. The creation of the poet is imbued with the very essence of human nature, while it is beautified by the infusion of so lovable and noble a spirit, that what we instinctively admire we are also able to comprehend, This is the chief difference between real greatness and mere excellence, whether in poet, sculptor, painter, or actor. The great poet appeals not only to the intellect which some men possess, but to the heart which all possess; everyone feels the meaning of his words, though everyone cannot explain it. I do not deny that the most exquisitely finished style in poetry, or in any other art, is perfectly compatible with greatness; but in work that is not only clever, but great, the style is subordinate to the matter; regularity of metre and precision of detail are sacrificed to nobility of thought and beauty of subject. The most faultless poems and pictures are rarely the noblest. Genius is impatient of restriction, seeking truth in great, rather than accuracy in little things;

and so it happens that talent often exceeds genius in beauty of form, but never in grandeur of imagination. Talent is apt to imitate, genius is sure to create; but be careful not to fancy yourselves geniuses simply because you are impatient of conventionality: vagueness and inaccuracy are not proofs of genius, though too often the blemishes which detract from its beauty. Cultivate style as carefully as you can; let it yield, if it must yield, to the force of your subject, not to the weakness of your execution.

I have been led to make these remarks, because those who detract from the merits of Shakespeare's plays in general, and of "Hamlet" in particular, are especially severe upon the want of regularity in the construction, and of natural sequence in the incidents of this tragedy; they also delight in pointing out the ruggedness of metre, and the crudeness of imagery, which are to be found in all Shakespeare's works. There is no doubt that "Cato," for instance, that solemnly elegant tragedy of Addison's, contains far fewer faults in scansion and regularity of metre than "Shakespeare's Hamlet;" but those persons who derive more pleasure from reading Cato than from studying Hamlet, must be allowed to exist, happy in that world of metrical proprieties which they have chosen to occupy; for my own part I dare not attempt to follow them. I have patiently read "Cato," some of Rowe's afflicting tragedies, and many others based upon the same models, which adorned the literature of the last century. I have no doubt that every line of these beautiful works contains some very pretty language, and the proper number of feet; but in very few lines do they contain anything which can touch the heart, charm the imagination, or elevate the soul.

There is a class of persons by whom Shakespeare is regarded very much as a young lady regards a black-beetle, or a lizard; with them the maxim is "omne ignotum pro horribili;" they have such a horror of Nature, that if they had their own way they would encase the trunks of the trees in petticoats, drape the bare rocks with decent dimity, and throw a veil over the naked verdure of the turf, in the shape of imitation Brussels: their timid aversion to Nature is in exact proportion to their ignorance of her.

But Shakespeare has been reviled by quite a different order of beings, of whom, perhaps, the chief is Voltaire. I doubt if any worshipper of Shakespeare's genius has ever done so much to exalt his ideal, as the malignant abuse of Voltaire's powerful but cankered mind has done. I would not wish to

speak with disrespect of one whom so many great intellects regard with something more than admiration; but I cannot consent to bow down before a mind, however great in itself, which was degraded by him, to whom it was given as a sacred trust and as a glorious responsibility, to the most foul and ignoble ends which perverted intellect ever sought to accomplish.

Malone may claim the merit of industry and research, though the application of both is frequently wrong; but as a critic he is unsympathetic.* He seems to have criticised "Hamlet" in the same spirit in which he would criticise his grocer's bill, examining all the items to see if they were correct, and insisting that all the articles should be inscribed in clear and legible type. There are many clever men now living who affect to despise Shakespeare; if they only showed one-tenth part of the industry in trying to comprehend his many beauties which they parade in ferreting out his faults, they would earn more respect for their capacities than they do at present. They are mostly men of a type too common, alas! now-a-days, who seem just clever enough to know that they are clever, and who use their minds in such a way as to make the truly wise and good regret that they ever had any.

The number of commentaries and essays which have been written on the tragedy of "Hamlet" is so great that time will not allow me to do more than mention a very few of those which are best worth your attention. Goethe and Coleridge have both exercised their powers of psychological analysis on the character of Hamlet; I need scarcely say that every one, wishing to study this play critically, should read every word which those two intellectual giants have written on the subject. The commentaries of Johnson, Steevens, and Malone are very unequal; whatever is valuable in their annotations will be found in later editions of Shakespeare, especially in that published by Routledge, edited by Staunton. Professor Richardson's† essay on "Hamlet" shows more correct appreciation of the beauties of the character than any other that I have come across, always excepting Coleridge's lecture. A volume containing the plays of "Hamlet" and "As You Like It," published as a specimen of a new edition of Shakespeare,

* I do not mean to disparage Malone's labours as an annotator; but as an æsthetic critic of Shakespeare I think he has committed outrages on good taste and good sense which can never be forgiven. Steevens is worse.

† London: Samuel Bagster. 1818.

anonymously by Thomas Caldecott,* contains some excellent notes. The best text of Shakespeare is the Cambridge edition, Macmillan, 1866; a reprint of the very rare quarto, 1603, the first known edition of "Hamlet," is given by the editors, Messrs. Clark and Wright, to whom all students of Shakespeare owe an enormous debt of gratitude. If I were asked to mention the best criticism, on the whole, which has been written on Shakespeare, I am afraid I should have to give you no English name, but that of a German, Schlegel.† This is something humiliating to our national vanity; but I do not think we need fear, now Germany has been swallowed up in Prussia, that Schlegel, any more than Goethe and Schiller, will find any successor. A nation which allows itself to be turned into one large barrack must be content with so glorious an achievement; it can well afford to leave more humanizing studies to those who have the leisure to follow them.

When Hamlet first enters,‡ it is in company with the King (his uncle), the Queen (his mother), and their Court. Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, has married, within the short space of a month after her husband's death, Claudius, his brother and successor. Why the elder Hamlet was not succeeded, as in due course he should have been, by his only son, is not explained; but we learn from the King's speech to the Court, that both his usurpation of the throne, and his incestuous marriage with his brother's wife, had been sanctioned by the principal lords of his council, whether willingly or under compulsion we do not know. Perhaps the comparative youth of Hamlet, and the fact that the kingdom was at that time threatened by an invasion of the Norwegians under young Fortinbras, were the reasons which induced the royal councillors of Denmark to place the sceptre in the hands of Claudius, who might be supposed better able to cope with so formidable a foe.

The figure of Hamlet, dressed in black, his eyes cast on the ground, his whole appearance betraying the utmost dejection, the only mourner in the brilliant Court, at once arrests the attention. We cannot wonder at his melancholy when we consider the position in which he found himself. The news of his father's sudden death would have reached him at the University of Wittenburg: it is most probable that the first parting between him and his father had taken place when he went to that town to complete his education. He hurried back on hearing the dreadful news, and naturally

* London: John Murray. Second edition, 1833 (first edition, 1819).
† See Additional Notes, No. 1. ‡ See Appendix A.

the first person he would seek in his sorrow was his mother. We can imagine what a terrible shock it must have been to his feelings when he found her preparing for her wedding with her late husband's brother, almost before that husband's funeral rites were over; the revolting features of such an union were intensified by the indecent haste with which it was completed. It is probable that the revulsion of feeling, which such an outrage on his father's memory would cause in a nature like Hamlet's, prevented him from dwelling on the mortification which he must have suffered on finding himself ousted from the throne by his incestuous uncle. It is natural that Hamlet should at once have suspected that the death of his father was no accident of nature; the story of a serpent having stung him in his sleeep was probably believed by very few in the Danish Court, certainly not by Hamlet. At the same time time, the fact of Claudius being supported by the chief lords of the country, the imminence of war, and the want of any strong party in the State favourable to his own succession, restrained Hamlet from making any attempt to claim his right.

Claudius, very plausibly and with an assumption of fatherly affection, greets Hamlet as his son and future successor. As to the suspicion which Hamlet entertained of foul play, he could take no immediate action thereon without some evidence; and his generous nature would be hampered in any such attempt by the consciousness that such a suspicion might spring as much from wounded vanity, on account of his being deprived of his rights, as from affection for his father. The very first words that he speaks in reply to the King, who has addressed him as—"My son"

> —a little more than kin and less than kind,

words probably intended to be spoken half aside, show how impossible was any reconciliation between stepfather and stepson. It is to be remarked that Hamlet only once addresses the King during this first scene, and that in the sarcastic answer to—

> KING. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
> HAM. Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun.

The very fact that the King does not dare to rebuke Hamlet for the marked manner in which he ignores his advice, tendered as it is with affected kindness, shows that he was conscious of his guilt. Short as the scene is which precedes Hamlet's first soliloquy, nothing can be more admirable than the skill with which Shakespeare at once strikes the key-note

of his hero's character, and seizes hold of the attention of his hearers. It is to be noted that while rebuking his mother, Hamlet never forgets the respect due to her in presence of the Court; it is not till he is alone that his pent up feelings, the passionate indignation which he has been forced to conceal, burst forth in this magnificent soliloquy:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead! nay, not so much, not two:
So excellent a king; that was, to this,
Hyperion to a satyr: so loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet within a month—
Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears:—why she, even she,—
O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer,—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules: within a month;
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good:
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue! *

How completely Hamlet is overcome by this torrent of conflicting emotions is made evident from the fact that on the entrance of Horatio, his bosom friend, he does not at first recognise his voice; the words "I am glad to see you well," are spoken half mechanically, with the instinctive courtesy of a well-bred prince; it is not till he has recovered himself that he greets his friend with all the natural warmth of his heart, "Horatio, or I do forget myself." A little afterwards there is a slight touch which often escapes the actor. Horatio is accompanied by Marcellus and Bernardo, of whom Bernardo is known to Hamlet but slightly; he answers the greeting of Marcellus less warmly than that of Horatio, but still in such a manner as to show that he is a friend who enjoys his confidence, "I am very glad to see you;" then turning to

* See Appendix B.

Bernardo, who has not ventured to intrude himself upon his prince's notice, he says, "Good even, Sir;" immediately after having thus satisfied the claims of politeness, he turns eagerly again to Horatio, of whose departure from Wittenburg he was evidently ignorant. Though every line of this scene is worthy of comment, I must not detain you too long at this stage of our story. Hamlet now hears for the first time of the appearance of his father's ghost; he does not jump at once to the conclusion, as a meaner nature would have done, that his suspicion of his uncle is confirmed; most rigidly, though courteously, he questions Horatio and the others upon the circumstances under which the spectre had appeared; he binds all three to silence, and when they are gone, there is no vulgar outburst of triumph at the justification of his hatred for his uncle; he speaks a few solemn words ending with that grand expression of confidence in eternal justice,

> Foul deeds will rise,
> Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

In the next scene night has come. On the platform before the castle, Hamlet, accompanied only by Horatio and Marcellus, the two friends whom he could most trust, is waiting anxiously for the hour when the ghost is wont to appear; the solemn silence is rudely broken by the sound of revelry from the castle, within whose walls the gross and sensual Claudius is carrying on his usual revels, attempting, like all low natures, to drown his conscience in drink. Nothing can be stronger than the contrast between the gluttony, and animal brutality, of the murderer, swilling toasts and watching "the swaggering up-spring reels" to the din of kettle-drums and trumpets; and the son, with the only two noblemen whom he could trust of all those who had flattered his father when alive, "and warmed themselves in the bountiful sunshine of his favour," standing, his black cloak, the sign of a heart's mourning, wrapped round him, waiting for the solemn visitation of his father's spirit, whose warning voice was soon to denounce the murderer. Hamlet has scarcely had time to condemn, in most eloquent language, the unseemly revelry, when the ghost appears; at first, but for a moment, Hamlet is awe-struck at the supernatural sight; then all his affection breaks forth in an agonised appeal to the spectre, concluding with those words which show that his is no mere sentimental grief, "What should we do?" Though Horatio before had dared to address the apparition, he now shows the utmost alarm at the idea of Hamlet following it; this alarm is utterly unselfish; it is for his friend

alone that he fears. The beautiful lines in which Hamlet rebukes this fear are well known; the passionate sentences, in which he defies their interference, bring this scene to a fitting conclusion. The ghost disappears, closely but reverently followed by Hamlet; and the friends, shaking off the terror of the supernatural in their apprehension for their beloved prince's safety, follow them after a short delay.

To a more remote part of the platform, or high ground, upon which the castle stood, sufficiently far away from the sound of the revelry of Claudius and his boon companions to leave the silence of the hour undisturbed, save by the sound of the waves beating against the rocks beneath, the ghost leads Hamlet. "Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak —I'll go no further," Hamlet exclaims, remembering the warning of Horatio. Then the well-known face, stamped with more than kingly majesty of sorrow, is turned towards him, and for the first time the spirit of his father speaks. The solemnity of this scene can never be surpassed: one seems to hear in the speeches of the ghost the grand diapason of some supernatural organ echoing from the depths of the unseen world. The rapt attention of Hamlet—the expression of pity, "Alas! poor ghost," instantly checked by the sad rebuke, "Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold;" the splendid resonance of every line which the ghost utters; the very apprehension which his first words excite, lest he should be recalled to the "sulphurous and tormenting flames" before he has completed the solemn charge of vengeance—all these circumstances and masterly touches of the poet combine together to produce such a vivid impression of the supernatural, as no effort of the painter or the mechanist could ever hope to accomplish.

The very few words that Hamlet utters during his interview with his father's spirit not only serve to intensify the dramatic effect of the scene, but also to illustrate his character in the most incisive manner; they are just like those few magic strokes of a great artist's pencil which make a face that one knows live before one. He echoes the word "murder" in a tone half of horror, half of painful astonishment at the justification of his suspicions. The next speech, the longest by which he interrupts the ghost, is most remarkable :—

> Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
> As meditation or the thoughts of love,
> May sweep to my revenge.

Shakespeare employs here—not by accident, I think—as illustrations of that swiftness of action, the want of which becomes afterwards the most prominent defect in Hamlet's character, those two very distinctive features of his disposition which so frequently retarded the execution of the ghost's commands, "meditation" and "the thoughts of love:" an over-indulgence in meditating on the innumerable aspects of the wrong which he had to revenge, and an imperfect power of wiping out of his life that love which had been the sweetest part of it, were, undoubtedly, the two main obstacles in his fulfilment of that purpose which the solemn interview with his father's spirit had made, as he believed, the one motive of his life. The only other words he speaks, "Oh, my prophetic soul, my uncle," may be regarded less as the expression of gratified vanity, or malice, at finding that he had at once instinctively detected the murderer of his father, than as a sigh of relief from a generous heart, rejoiced to find that he had not wronged one who had given him the greatest cause for resentment.

The echo of the spirit's sad farewell, "Adieu, adieu, adieu; remember me," has scarcely died away before the tension of nerves from which Hamlet has suffered during that most pathetic address is relieved by that outburst of passionate emotion, which, singular to state, most of the representatives of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, on the stage, have either omitted to a great extent, or have deformed into a mere interjection:

HAM. O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! hold, hold my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark. (*Writing.*)
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
It is "Adieu, adieu! remember me."
I have sworn 't.*

Here we have at once the evidence of Hamlet's titanic strength of feeling, and the foreshadowing of that convulsion

* See Appendix C.

of the mind which renders his simulation of madness almost a necessity. He seems to feel that the task imposed upon him is so terrible that he can find no room in his life for any other pursuit, affection, or passion.

Study, speculation, philosophy, love, must all yield to this one great purpose; and there is no doubt that had the guilty Claudius entered at that moment, the murder of King Hamlet would have been instantly avenged. But while his mind is still surging with the agitation into which the ghost's narrative has plunged it, the voices of his friends are suddenly heard; and the necessity for concealment at once engrosses his faculties, causing him to check himself, when he is on the very point of bestowing upon them that confidence which alone could have relieved his over-charged heart. The conclusion of this scene has been more misunderstood by the exponents of Hamlet in the theatre, and by the students of his character in the closet, than any other portion of the tragedy, except one—the scene with Ophelia.

Coleridge has expressed in one sentence what seems to me the whole gist of the scene: "For you may perhaps observe that Hamlet's wildness is but half false; he plays that subtle trick of pretending to act only when he is very near really being what he acts." I cannot agree with Coleridge that the subterranean speeches of the ghost "are nearly indefensible;" they seem to me to be absolutely necessary, in order to bring out that feverish anxiety to conceal from all others the solemn revelation which he has received; an anxiety which induces Hamlet to hurry Horatio and Marcellus away from each spot whence* the voice seems to come, forgetting that he alone can hear it; and gives him time for maturing hastily, but effectually, that scheme, by which alone he perceives that he can preserve his freedom of action, and give to his over-taxed mind that relief which is absolutely necessary, if it is not utterly to lose its balance. However strange or odd he may bear himself in future, these two trustworthy friends, at least, are secure to him as allies; for they will not be surprised at those "antic dispositions;" but will accept, wholly and sincerely, as an assumption that which may be assumed indeed at some times, but at others will be only the inevitable indulgence of a mind filled with so terrible a purpose, that the relief of eccentricity becomes absolutely necessary to its healthy existence.

Nothing can be more affecting than the mixture here presented—the forced employment of a cunning most repul-

* See Additional Notes, No. 2 A.

sive to his own over-frank character, and those touching appeals to the affection of his friends which would be the natural relief of his sensitive nature—

> So, gentlemen,
> With all my love I do commend me to you:
> And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
> May do, to express his love and friending to you,
> God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together;
> And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
> The time is out of joint: O cursed spite!
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> Nay, come, let's go together.

Between the first and second acts an interval of time occurs, the exact length of which we have no means of ascertaining;* but that it consisted of several days, at least, is evident from the fact that the ambassadors to Norway had time to fulfil their mission, and to return; also that the King and Queen had time, after having observed Hamlet's altered demeanour, to procure the presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, most probably from Wittenburg. How Hamlet employed this interval is to us the important question; he seems to have taken no step towards the fulfilment of the ghost's charge, except the consistent assumption of that eccentricity and humorous melancholy, by which he hoped to gain a character for harmless oddity; for we can hardly use such a strong term as madness, though Polonius most wisely expounds the reasons why he is mad. The ingenious Mr. Malone says that nothing could be more foolish than Hamlet's assumption of madness, because that was the very way to provoke the King to place him under restraint, and so prevent his doing anything to revenge his father's death. If Hamlet had counterfeited what doctors call the homicidal mania, this remark would have been a very sensible one; for Mr. Malone, whose only eccentricity took the perfectly innocent form of very dull criticism, would probably regard such an odd character as Hamlet as a dangerous lunatic; but King Claudius was not so sensitive on this point as Mr. Malone, and when he saw that his nephew was by turns melancholy and satirical, that he courted solitude and shrank from taking part in any of the Court festivities, but that he never attempted to injure himself or anybody else, he could have no pretext for depriving him of his liberty. He was naturally anxious to conciliate Hamlet because, after all, the young prince was loved by the people, and Claudius dared not show any open animosity

* See Additional Notes, No. 2.

against him;* it was his object to conceal his crime, which was, as he believed, known only to himself; though he instinctively felt that the son of his murdered brother suspected him.

The most important step which Hamlet had taken was the resolution to break off his affectionate relations with Ophelia. The struggle must have been a very severe one. The meddlesome officiousness of Polonius in compelling his daughter to cease all correspondence with the young prince, as being above her sphere, was a piece of diplomacy by which he hoped to obtain an explicit proposal for her hand; the shallow meanness of which device Hamlet most probably saw through. This forcible severance of all communication between Ophelia and himself seemed a plausible reason enough for Hamlet's melancholy; but we know it had little or nothing to do with it; and we may be sure that it had less to do with his abandonment of his love-suit. On the day on which the second act commences we have Ophelia's vivid and beautiful description of the last interview, if we may call it so, that took place between them:—

OPH. My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle;
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous to purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me.
POL. Mad for thy love?
OPH. My lord, I do not know,
But truly I do fear it.
POL. What said he?

Ophelia's modest expression of her belief contrasts beautifully with the pompous assurance of Polonius. She goes on—

OPH. He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. Long stayed he so;
At last a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving and up and down,
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound

* See Act IV., Sc. 3 (King's Speech):

Yet must not we put the strong law on him:
He's loved of the distracted multitude.
—*Et seq*

Also (in same Act) Sc. VII., lines 18—24.

> As it did seem to shatter all his bulk,
> And end his being: that done, he lets me go:
> And with his head over his shoulder turn'd,
> He seem'd to find his way without his eyes;
> For out o' doors he went without their helps,
> And to the last bended their light on me.

Now, the question is, what was in Hamlet's mind when he gave way to this violent agitation? It has been said by some commentators that he behaved in this extraordinary manner in order to impress upon Ophelia's simple nature the belief that he was mad; I cannot but think that Shakespeare meant something more than this. Since his interview with the Ghost, Hamlet's mind had been dwelling upon his father's sad fate, and upon his mother's atrocious infidelity. What a fearful shock it must have been to his affectionate nature to know that the mother whom he had so loved and reverenced had been false to a husband so noble, so gentle, so loving, that the most abandoned woman might have shrunk from dishonouring him! The revelation of such a hideous fact might have forced a far stronger nature than Hamlet's to abandon all faith in womankind. During those days of mental agony, when he might have looked for the gentle consolation of her he loved, he was left to suffer alone, uncheered, save by the occasional company and the heartfelt sympathy of one true friend, Horatio. At such a time the horrid idea must have been present to his mind that the pure and innocent girl to whom he had given his first and only love might possibly grow up to become—most horrible thought!—what his mother was. Doubtless, his father had often told him of the perfect joy and happiness which he had known when he first married his young and virtuous bride; she had been no less innocent and no less pure, no less single-minded in her devotion to her betrothed than Ophelia; and yet what had she become? No wonder that with such a terrible thought ever haunting him, Hamlet forgot to carry out the command which his father's spirit had enjoined. When he escaped from this mental torture, another difficulty stared him in the face; he knew his weakness, no one better; could he pursue the sweet course of love and obey the Ghost as well? Could he ask Ophelia to link herself with a life so insecure, with a heart and mind so preoccupied, with a nature crushed under the weight of such a terrible responsibility? He struggled, and not unsuccessfully, against those hideous forebodings as to what Ophelia might become; he flung away all suspicion of her perfect purity; but one of the two must be given up, his love or his task of vengeance. While the struggle is going on within him,

while his heart-strings are snapping asunder, pale and trembling beneath the tempest of emotion, he bursts into the chamber of his love, like the apparition of some terrible transformation of himself; he holds her by the wrist; he gazes into her eyes, as though he would read the very depth of her nature, as if he would know the full beauty of that heart which he is giving up for ever; he cannot trust himself to speak; his frame is convulsed with a sigh so piteous and profound that it seemed to shatter his very body, a sigh which was the cry of a breaking heart; without removing his gaze from her, whom he was never to look on again with the eyes of love, he vanishes from the room, unable to utter the awful sentence of death to his love which his heart had pronounced.

I must here allude to a question which it would be more pleasant to pass over altogether, were such a course not capable of misconstruction; some people have held, and other's hold still, the monstrous opinion that Hamlet was guilty of the ruin of Ophelia.* This accusation, which betrays ignorance of this play itself, and an utter inability to comprehend Shakespeare's mode of working, is easily refuted. It rests upon the verses of some idle song, caught up, probably, from her nurse, which Ophelia innocently sings in her madness. Nobody can examine the scenes between Polonius and Ophelia, Laertes and his sister, or that between her and Hamlet, without seeing at once that this accusation is utterly groundless. Shakespeare would not have wantonly introduced such a foul stain upon Hamlet's character without using it for some dramatic purpose. The suggestion of vice is a delicacy of modern date. Hamlet's love for Ophelia was pure and honourable; and any one who thinks the contrary is not to be envied. For my own part, whatever objection may be taken to the song alluded to, I cannot but think that it is one of Shakespeare's most delicate touches in the sweetly innocent character of Ophelia, that when her unhappy mind is so distraught with grief for her father, and her reason is overthrown, she should repeat, with such simple child-like ignorance of their meaning, the verses which probably she had never heard since she was being dandled on her nurse's knee, and which, in her right senses, she might never have remembered.

As I am now treating of the relations between Hamlet and Ophelia, it would be better to go at once to that scene at the beginning of the third act, which has caused so many difficulties both to actors and critics. It is very necessary for the right understanding of this scene that we should carefully observe what has gone before. Polonius, having come to the

* See Appendix D.

conclusion from what Ophelia has told him, and from letters of Hamlet's to her which he has found, that the cause of Hamlet's madness is simply love for his daughter, proposes that Ophelia should place herself in the gallery, or lobby, in which Hamlet is accustomed to walk for hours together; and that the King and he should conceal themselves behind the arras and watch the result; "if," Polonius says, "he love her not,"

> And be not from his reason fall'n thereon,
> Let me be no assistant for a state,
> But keep a farm and carters.

This proposal is carried out; Ophelia is given a book and told to read it—

> That show of such an exercise may colour
> Your loneliness.

In fact she is made a party, a direct and conscious party to the trap set for her lover.

Hamlet enters, debating with himself the question of suicide in that well-known soliloquy, "To be or not to be," &c., at the end of which he turns and sees Ophelia seemingly in prayer. I think it extremely probable that Ophelia is intended really to be praying for the unhappy prince, whose agitation during the soliloquy she cannot fail to have observed. Hamlet accosts her with serious but kindly courtesy—

> Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remember'd.

Ophelia answers—

> Good, my lord,
> How does your honour for this many a day?

Except in that awful interview which she has described to Polonius, during which, as you remember, Hamlet never spoke, Ophelia has not seen him for some time. Hamlet answers as if wishing to check any inquiry into the cause of his apparent illness, "I humbly thank you: well."

> OPH. My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
> That I have longed long to re-deliver;
> I pray you, now receive them.

She had probably been instructed by her father to return Hamlet's presents. Hamlet determined to avoid the discussion of a very painful question, perhaps also to ignore the fearful state of agitation in which he had been when he last saw Ophelia, and shrinking from definitely breaking off all affectionate relations between them, denies having given these gifts to Ophelia—

> No, not I;
> I never gave you aught.
> OPH. My honour'd lord, you know right well you did;

> And with them words of so sweet breath composed ;
> As made the things more rich : their perfume lost,
> Take these again ; for to the noble mind
> Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
> There, my lord.

At this point, just as Ophelia is going to force back on Hamlet the sweet remembrances of his love, the fussy old Polonius, who has been fidgeting behind the arras, anxious to see the result of his most notable device, pops his head out, and in so doing drops his chamberlain's staff: Hamlet hears the noise, and instantly suspects the truth, that he is being made the object of an artfully devised scheme to entrap him into some confession of his secret. His suspicions had been already aroused by the manifest constraint of Ophelia's manner; at the same time his heart had been deeply touched at the equally manifest emotion under which she laboured. True, she was acting a part; but she was speaking from her own heart when she alluded to the sweet words of love which had accompanied Hamlet's presents, when she recalled the happy hours she had spent with him before this mysterious shadow had fallen on his life. We may imagine that, but for his worst suspicions being aroused by the evidence that he was being watched, he would have spoken to Ophelia with the greatest affection; now, however, it is with a rude revulsion of feeling that he treats her as a party to, indeed as the chief agent of, the deception contrived against him: all that follows is couched in half enigmatical satire, the sting of which is fully to be comprehended only by the guilty Claudius. Hamlet, who guesses he is one of the parties concealed, speaks at the King, as it were, the threats he dare not utter to his face: at the same time there is a wild incoherence about Hamlet's words which can only serve to bewilder the hearers as to the real cause of his condition.

After warning Ophelia against believing any man, thereby conveying a delicate rebuke of her deceitfulness, Hamlet is about to leave her with the words—

> Go thy ways to a nunnery.

He is crossing the stage, when his eye falls on that part of the arras whence the noise had proceeded, and he is instantly struck by some such thoughts as these :—

"Have I been right in suspecting this innocent maiden of being, knowingly, a party to such a contemptible trick? Can she, whose pure and open nature I so loved, be capable of such paltry disingenuous conduct? No! before I condemn her I will put her to the plain proof."

He turns round and holds out his hands towards her; she, forgetting her part, thinking, poor girl, he is going to take her to his breast and forgive her, flies across to him; he checks her with his outstretched hand, and holding hers, he looks straight into her eyes, as only one who loves her has a right to look into a maiden's eyes, and he solemnly asks her the question, "Where is your father?" What can she answer? Once committed to deceit there is no escape from it. She would fain tell the truth, but she dares not; she thinks it would be disobedience to her father, and unkindness to her poor distracted lover, were she to do so. With downcast eyes and blushing cheek, with hands relaxing their grasp, escaping from the touch of him she loves so well, she falters out her first lie, "At home, my lord." There is a little pause; then with a sigh, as his last hope in the truthfulness of one woman at least dies in him, he drops her hand, saying with solemn sternness—

Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house. Farewell.

Ophelia, who sees in this strange answer nothing but the sign of a noble mind o'erthrown, utters the simple prayer—

O, help him, you sweet heavens!

But now indignation has taken the place of sorrow with Hamlet, and he bursts into a bitter denunciation of the follies and petty deceits of women; lashing those very faults from which Ophelia seemed, and was indeed, freest; so that she can feel no pain and anger on her own account, all that she can feel is the agony of grief at seeing her sweetest hope for ever ended, her worst fears too fully confirmed.

Whether the view of this scene which I have ventured to put forward is, or is not, the correct one, it is at any rate a more consistent one than that which would see in these speeches of Hamlet nothing but brutal outrages on the feelings of her whom, as he afterwards tells us, "he loved," so that

—forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

PART II.

THE consideration of Hamlet's relations to Ophelia caused me, at the end of my last lecture, to diverge from the regular course of the play, which up to that point we had followed pretty closely. Having endeavoured to discover by the simplest inductions what, or rather some of what, had taken place in the interval between the first and second acts, I must now revert almost to the very commencement of the second act, when we first hear of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet's conduct towards these two plastic noblemen has furnished some of the commentators with a sufficiently plausible text for their denunciations of his moral character. We shall see how far these denunciations are justified. The King, in welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, addresses them as if they were the two most intimate friends that Hamlet possessed; his words are—

> —I entreat you both,
> That, being of so young days brought up with him
> And sith so neighbour'd to his youth and haviour,
> That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
> Some little time: so by your companies
> To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather
> So much as from occasion you may glean,
> Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus,
> That open'd lies within our remedy.

The Queen adds—

> Good gentlemen, he hath much talk'd of you,
> And sure I am two men there are not living
> To whom he more adheres.

I will only remark here that it is evident that Hamlet had taken both his mother and his uncle very incompletely into his confidence, and that neither of them suspected the depth

of the friendship, and the completeness of the intimacy, that existed between him and Horatio.

The request of both King and Queen is couched in language to which no person of an unsuspicious and courteous disposition could take exception; an eccentric nature, like Hamlet's, might have found some ground for suspicion, both in the confidence with which the request to watch their friend is preferred, and the readiness with which it is granted. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave the royal presence in search of Hamlet: they find Polonius just coming away from him, after a rather unsatisfactory interview, in which Hamlet has relieved the depression of his spirits by several humorous sallies at the expense of the Lord Chamberlain. It would seem, by the way, that this functionary, in virtue of his office, inherits the privilege of being the cause of wit in others, especially in playwrights: the respectable successor* to the dignities of Polonius has, in our own day, contrived to earn the splendid distinction of infusing into the ghastly corpse of burlesque some faint spark of life; having accomplished thus much, he can hardly look back upon his career without some pardonable pride; for my own part, I wish that worthy nobleman a future of unblemished tranquillity. This little discursion is not quite so irrelevant as it may seem; for we know that in the character of Polonius, Shakespeare laid the irreverent cudgel of his satire on the sacred back of no less a personage than Lord Burleigh. I must guard myself, however, from the suspicion of any intention to infer that the ridicule, of which Lord Sydney has been made the object by the facetious writers of our day, is of equal gravity with the satire levelled by Shakespeare against Lord Burleigh; any more than the office of Lord High Treasurer, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, can be held to be of equal importance with that of Lord High Chamberlain in the reign of Queen Victoria.

The tedium which Polonius has inflicted upon Hamlet renders more natural the gleeful satisfaction with which he receives his young friends; after some pleasantries which were better omitted, Hamlet inquires

> What's the news?

He follows up this question with another, in which he strikes the key-note of his own misery; he talks of Denmark as a prison, and pursuing the same train of thought, finds but little sympathy from the two courtiers; this awakens his suspicion. It is generally the case, when the mind of any

* This was written when Lord Sydney was in office.

person is dwelling morbidly on one idea, that coldness, if not repugnance, is immediately occasioned towards those from whom he can elicit no fellow-feeling with his dominant idea. The impatience with which Hamlet reiterates his demand for a straightforward answer to the question,

what make you at Elsinore?

shows how much on the alert is his wounded sensitiveness. The earnestness of his appeal seems almost out of proportion to the matter in hand; he resents every attempt at equivocation, however polite:—

Were you not sent for?

then, getting no direct answer,

You *were* sent for—
I know the good king and queen have sent for you.

Repulsed again—

But let me conjure you, by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer could charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you were sent for, or no.

At this point Hamlet steps back some little distance from the two, and eyes them with a piercing glance: they are poor actors, these two supple courtiers; and they look vacantly, one to another, for some answer to this unpleasantly direct appeal. Straightforwardness is not their forte; they have the shiftiness of diplomacy, not its cunning. Hamlet's aside,

Nay, then, I have an eye of you,

shows that he has read their hearts. To his last appeal,

If you love me, hold not off

they are not proof. The shame-faced confession reluctantly oozes from them under the pressure of a single-purposed mind—

My lord, we were sent for.

Hamlet's object is gained, but his confidence in these two is gone for ever; through the rest of the scene he treats them with a most gracious courtesy; he seeks to efface the memory of his rude directness, but his demeanour to them lacks that genuine warmth, that ingenuous heartiness, which invariably distinguishes his intercourse with Horatio. Whether his sensitiveness and his suspicion were alike morbid and overstrained, results must show. To him the words "He who is not for me is against me" were

terribly true; to him there were only two sides to every question—only two principles for every action; every one with whom he came into contact must either side with him in his devotion to his father's memory, or with the King and Queen in their treason to that memory. It is pretty evident to Hamlet, from this first interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which side they had chosen.

There are two things I wish particularly to notice in this scene; one is that Hamlet makes a distinct allusion to the contempt with which he is treated at Court; when both his young friends offer to wait upon him, he replies, "I will not sort you with the rest of my servants; for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended."*

Another point is, that during the whole of his conversation with them Hamlet does not assume the madman; all that he says is full of humour, of satire, and notably in one instance, the speech in which he accounts for his melancholy, it is full of poetry. He hints to them over and over again that the real cause of his estrangement from all the gaieties of the Court is to be found in the conduct of the King and Queen, but he never gets from them the slightest expression of sympathy; they are consistent courtiers, and the rising sun of to-day blinds them to the glories of the setting one of yesterday. In the last playful speech he addresses to them, before the re-entering of Polonius, he seems to warn them against lending themselves to any system of espionage on the part of the King and Queen:—

my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.

With an assumption of amiable imbecility, they answer—

In what, my dear lord?

Hamlet answers—

I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.†

Had they taken this kind hint, it would have been better for them.

Polonius now comes to announce the arrival of the players; for that we have been prepared, but not for the powerfully dramatic use to which Shakespeare turns them. Shaking off the seriousness, and the half-gloomy irony, which had distinguished his utterances while seeking to probe the sincerity of his two courtier friends, Hamlet gives the reins completely to

* See Additional Notes, No. 3. † See Additional Notes, No. 4.

his spirit of mischievous raillery against the unfortunate Lord Chamberlain. No doubt it strikes one as rather ungenerous in a prince so to treat one of his father's old servants; but the devotion of Polonius to the usurper is so thorough, and so zealous, that we may forgive Hamlet if he forgets, as the old courtier seems to have forgotten, that he had ever rendered service to, or received benefits from, any other master. Another excuse, as Coleridge suggests, may be offered for Hamlet's apparent rudeness to Polonius; and that is the grudge he would naturally bear against Ophelia's father for interfering so officiously between him and his love. Add to these that the prosy, pragmatical, self-opinionated, fussy Polonius, with his conventional ideas, his cowardly servility to Claudius, his contempt for play-actors as mere vagabonds allowed to exist on sufferance, was the absolute antithesis, not only of Hamlet, but we may venture to say of Shakespeare himself. In no character, except perhaps in that of Justice Shallow, is there more evidence of justifiable personal feeling on the part of the poet; justifiable, because it is only by strokes of satire like this, in which the personality of the victim is veiled in decent idealism, in which nothing affecting their more private life and sacred feelings is introduced, that oppressed or insulted genius can avenge itself upon powerful stupidity and titled commonplace.

Hamlet, after some gracious recognition of his old acquaintances, the players, asks one of them to repeat a certain speech which describes the death of Priam after the taking of Troy. To this he listens most intently, and the growing thoughtfulness of his expression shows that the words have for him some inner attraction, deeper than their mere dramatic merit could give them. He dismisses the players, under the charge of Polonius, cautioning the Lord Chamberlain—

To use them better than their deserts—

to treat them, in fact, with that generous courtesy with which persons of true honour and dignity ever treat their inferiors, conferring thereby a distinction on themselves which no homage from the recipients of their bounty could ever bestow. Hamlet stops the player who has spoken the speech, to ask him an apparently trivial question, but of which we soon see the importance; for once alone, and he gives way to the strong emotion which he has so long suppressed; he reveals to us all the workings of his thoughts in that speech, which is, perhaps, the most intensely dramatic of all Hamlet's soliloquies.

ACT II.—SCENE 2.

HAM. Now I am alone.
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd;
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!
Why what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon't! foh! About my brain! Hum, I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak,
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. [*Exit.**

* See Appendix E.

Easily and naturally has Shakespeare led up to this soliloquy, which closes an act that might, at first sight, seem to threaten a falling off from the former one; for in that the interest excited by the appearance of the Ghost was intense, and the entire dramatic construction strikingly perfect; quite as naturally, in this analysis of the workings of no ordinary mind and heart, are the steps and minute gradations of thought portrayed, which lead Hamlet to form the resolution with which the speech concludes.

First let us observe that, while in his first soliloquy all his indignation was expended on his mother, it is now principally directed against himself; at first he was reflecting on her incomprehensible infidelity and on the treachery of his uncle; and though in the last words—

It is not, nor it cannot come to, good—

he hinted at the suspicions which he entertained, in the very next words he acknowledges that the necessity of silence is imposed upon him—

But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

Now all the circumstances are completely changed. The most solemn charge that could be given to man—most solemn because it would seem that Nature's very laws had been set aside for the purpose of enjoining on him this sacred duty—had been given to Hamlet by the Spirit of that father at whose wrongs he had hitherto been so helplessly indignant—

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

It was imperative on him now, not only to speak, but to act. What had he done? What had he ever said? Had he denounced the treacherous murderer? Had he taken one step to bring him to justice? Here was a player, called upon at a moment's notice to repeat a speech, describing the sufferings of one utterly unknown to him; of one who had lived so long ago as almost to be out of the range of human sympathy; and yet in describing these sorrows, so great was the force of his mimic passion that one of his spectators could scarcely endure the sight of his agitation: if imaginary cruelties, if fictitious wrongs, could in their very recital so move the narrator, what would he feel if he had

The motive and the cue for passion

that Hamlet had? It does not affect the subtlety of this touch, on Shakespeare's part, that the argument Hamlet uses was entirely a false one. Calm reflection would have shown

him that the actor's passion was the result of practice in his art; that in the face of real calamity or actual wrong, he might have been as inactive as Hamlet accuses himself of being. But for this self-accusation there was real ground; and the extreme sensibility of Hamlet's nature could not but be struck by the reproof which such an admirably acted piece of passion would convey to him; his feelings were touched, not his intellect; to them, not to the latter, was the appeal made. I think this is why Shakespeare selected such dangerously bombastic language for the player's speech; had the poetry been more refined, the sentiment might have been less forcible; had the mind been more attracted, the heart might have been less moved. Hamlet contrasts, in language, which seems to have caught something of the reckless vehemence of the speech to which he had been listening, his own impassive silence with the furious passion which he supposes the player would have shown if in his place. He is whirled along in such a torrent of words, while denouncing his own cowardice, that when he turns to pour forth a string of abusive epithets against his uncle, the very excess of his violence works its own cure: finding all words exhausted and his rage reduced to the simple cry—

O, vengeance!

he immediately sees the folly and the uselessness of such mere vocal thunder, and calls upon his intellect once more to resume the sway which extravagance of feeling had overturned—

About, my brain!

Then suddenly, but clearly, he sees the practical use to which the force of mimic passion may be turned; he sees a chance of testing by natural means the truth of that supernatural visitation which he has suffered. It is not too much to say that, without knowing it, he snatches at another chance of delaying the stern action from which his nature has shrunk; for while he seemed, most plausibly to himself, to be advancing in the task of vengeance which had been set him, he was really delaying to strike that blow which must, in the natural course of things, become more difficult to strike every day; but had Hamlet acted with the decision of a Malone, or the relentless common sense of a Steevens, the world would have lost three acts, at least, of this most glorious play; and I am afraid that the approbation of these terrible judges, however gratifying to the "*manes*" of the poet, would scarcely have consoled the world at large for that loss.

The temporary distrust, which Hamlet expresses with regard to the genuineness of the apparition that he has seen, I look upon as of little importance, except as a symptom of that intermittent scepticism which often infects dispositions similar to that of Hamlet. The personality of the devil was a doctrine more generally accepted in Shakespeare's time than it is now. This distrust is not deep-seated in Hamlet's mind; he is but unconsciously employing arguments with himself, apparently suggested by prudence, but, in reality, springing from the inherent weakness of his character, which made him so ready to feel but so unready to act.

Between the second and third acts would seem to be an interval of twenty-four hours, or thereabouts. The very first words of the act, which are spoken by the King, indicate that the terrors of remorse are closing round him; he no longer speaks of Hamlet's state in the same moderate language that he used before: he inquires of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the result of their mission thus—

> And can you, by no drift of circumstance,
> Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
> Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
> With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

He then learns that Hamlet had commanded the players to play that night before him, and with a momentary sense of relief, little thinking what kind of a play he was going to witness, he gives a ready consent to be present at the entertainment. Then follows the scene to which I have already referred in my last lecture; Ophelia is set as the decoy to inveigle Hamlet's secret from him.

Having treated of this scene most amply, it is only necessary for me now to add a few observations on this grand soliloquy, which offers a complete contrast to the one which closed the last act; the last was a burst of long suppressed passion; this is deep meditation.

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause: there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life ;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin ? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of ?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.*

Brought, as it would seem, to the brink of decisive action, having most probably resolved, should the experiment of the play confirm beyond all doubt the revelation made to him by the Ghost, that he would kill the murderer without any further delay, the fatal weakness of Hamlet's character proves once more its supremacy over him by tempting him to that most cowardly escape from all earthly trials—suicide.

Although Shakespeare has not hampered himself by any over-delicate dread of anachronisms, it would have been too glaringly out of place to have represented Hamlet as restrained from suicide by any deep religious feeling. The uncertainty which the narrowest-minded infidel must feel as to the existence of a future state often serves, in the place of a nobler motive, to restrain him from the crime of taking his own life. Sensitive natures like Hamlet's are most exposed to this horrid temptation; but those very natures should be most open to the highest influences of religion, without which nothing, but what I may call an intelligent fear, could keep them, in many cases, from putting an end to that life the troubles and sorrows of which they cannot but feel more keenly than others. But we must not forget that in the case of Hamlet it is no guilty weakness on his own part, no contemptible abandonment to passion, no degraded indulgence of his appetites, that has brought him to feel that strange longing, which many of us at some time may have felt, to "slit the thin-spun thread of life" and so end all our troubles, at least in this world. It is in his case an over-

* See Appendix F.

whelming sense of the fearful task imposed on him, of the terribly conflicting affections which agitated him, of the seeming impossibility of revenging his father without cruelty to his mother; it is a noble despair at the apparent triumph of evil over good, not in his own nature but in the world around him; a despair which might well crush the strongest of us, did not faith in a God, not only all-powerful, and all-wise, but all-loving, sustain us.

The result of the interview between Hamlet and Ophelia on the King is remarkable; his dread of Hamlet, which had been increasing ever since the night of the ghost's appearance, now suggests to him that he must at any cost rid himself of his nephew's presence.

He shall with speed to England.

The first hint of that treacherous design which afterwards, as we know, he attempted to carry out with such signal failure. Polonius pleads for one more experiment:—

POL. Let his queen mother all alone entreat him
To show his grief: let her be round with him;
And I'll be placed, so please you, in the ear
Of all their conference. If she find him not,
To England send him, or confine him where
Your wisdom best shall think.
KING. It shall be so:
Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go.

One of the most distinctive features of this play is the infinite variety of it; the way in which the sombreness and pathos of tragedy are relieved by scenes not of vulgar farce or forced humour, but by frequent flashes of high comedy, or, as in the case of the gravedigger scene, natural humour. Indeed, it may be said of all Shakespeare's great tragedies, with the sole exception of "Macbeth"—in which the incidents are so many and the interest so intense, that no such relief is wanted—that he is always careful not to be monotonously gloomy, but to be true to nature, even in this point as in all others; for in life we rarely find but that the greatest calamity, or the heaviest sorrow, is relieved either by the presence of some element of beauty, or by a gleam of brightness, which extorts our admiration, or forces from us a smile, even at the supremest moment of fear or grief. This it is which more than anything else distinguishes Shakespeare from all his contemporaries or successors in tragic poetry: the oppressive gloom which crushes us in Ford, Marlowe, or Cyril Tourneur—to mention three of his most formidable rivals—or the tearful

tediousness of Otway, Rowe, and their many imitators, never affects us when reading the tragedies of Shakespeare. In accordance with this principle, before we approach the more tragic incidents of this play, Shakespeare affords us a pleasant resting place in the short scene between Hamlet and the players, in which he lays down in most admirable precepts and most perfect language the true principles of acting. This scene bears little upon the character of Hamlet except as it shows the universality of his talents and the liberality of his mind, and helps to establish his claim to be called in the beautiful language of Ophelia, "the glass of fashion and the mould of form."

Polonius, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, now enter to announce the consent of the King to be present at the play. Hamlet despatches them all three to hasten the players, in order that he may take Horatio into his confidence more thoroughly, and benefit by his aid in the experiment upon the King's conscience which he is now about to try. In this speech to Horatio Shakespeare has almost exceeded himself; a more beautiful epitome of the character of a true friend does not exist, nor a better guide for those who wish to find this treasure; we have in this speech further evidence of the singular clearness of Hamlet's judgment, and of the marvellous beauty of a character, the strength of whose intellect stands out in bolder relief from the very fact that in action he is so weak and undecided. We have here one note for the actor which he should heed well in the following scene—

For I mine eyes will rivet to his face.

Were the force of this line more heeded by the representatives of Hamlet on the stage, we should not be tormented by those exhibitions of feline agility with which they seem to think it incumbent to favour us in the celebrated play scene.

King and Court have now arrived. It must be acknowledged that Claudius' overtures to his nephew do not meet with much encouragement. Hamlet replies to the courteous inquiry—

KING. **How fares our cousin Hamlet?**
HAM. **Excellent, i' faith; of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise crammed:**

By which words he means to refer to the fact that his uncle has promised that he should succeed to the throne; a very generous promise, which restored to him his right when the usurper could no longer enjoy it. The demeanour and lan-

guage of Hamlet to Ophelia in this scene are both repulsive: it is not enough to blame the coarseness of the times for such blemishes in the works of one who, in general, was pure-minded. I think some explanation of Hamlet's revolting language may be found, if we presume that my interpretation of the former scene (Act III, Sc. 1) was a correct one. Hamlet has ceased to respect Ophelia after detecting her in a deliberate lie; he may exaggerate the disrespect which mortification induced him to show towards her, for the purpose of impressing the King and Queen, and still more the courtiers, with the idea that he was scarcely responsible for his actions; at any rate this short dialogue serves to enhance the sweet purity and innocence of Ophelia's character; and as all the offensive portion of it can be omitted from representation without any injury to the interest of the play, we need not dwell any further upon it.

The course of the play represented before the Court is interrupted by a few short and striking sentences between Hamlet and the King and Queen. The King begins to suspect the gist of the play.

Is there no offence in't?

he asks of Hamlet, to which he answers—

No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest.

By a great effort of self-restraint Hamlet preserves the same quiet tone of bitter irony throughout, while his eyes cannot be diverted, even by the beautiful face of Ophelia, from their fixed watchfulness of the King. The poisoner in the play represented is the nephew of the king; this, I think, is no accident; by making the relation the same as between himself and Claudius, Hamlet adds one more to the many strokes of irony directed against his uncle. While the mimic poisoner is in the very act of pouring the poison into the sleeping king's ear on the stage, Hamlet half rises from his recumbent attitude and thus explains the incident:

He poisons him i' the garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago; the story is extant, and written in very choice Italian: you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

At this point most of the actors, that I have seen in the part of Hamlet, are wont to execute what I must venture to call the most vulgar piece of melodramatic absurdity which can be conceived. They crawl on their hands and knees from the feet of Ophelia to the King, whilst the poisoner is speaking his short speech on the stage; they then scream, or rant, in

*

the King's ear these words, in such a manner as to justify any respectable and sane member of the Court of Denmark in conducting Hamlet to the nearest dungeon. Tradition, deriving itself from Edmund Kean, is said to justify this astonishing piece of business (technically so called); but not every actor, much less every man, is an Edmund Kean, and what may have appeared natural and effective in him, certainly appears quite the contrary in his imitators. To me it seems an error from the actor's point of view, for surely it would be much more effective, as well as natural, that Hamlet should not abandon himself to the intensity of his excitement until he is alone with Horatio, which he is a few moments afterwards, when he bursts into that wild song of triumph—

> Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
> The hart ungalled play;
> For some must watch, while some must sleep:
> Thus runs the world away.*

Any licence may be allowed to the actor now; exulting in the success of his scheme, Hamlet gives way to an excitement almost hysterical. His satirical humour shows itself in the midst of this exultation, in fact he uses it here, as in many other instances, partly as a veil to conceal the depth of his feelings; he calls for music because the tension of his nerves is becoming too great to bear; but before the recorders, or small flutes, can be brought, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern re-enter, and Hamlet speedily regains his self-possession in the presence of the two courtiers, whose demeanour is so much changed as to verge almost on insolence. The dignified sarcasm which Hamlet displays in this scene shows that, when he chose, his self-command was as complete as that of the sanest person; although he tells them that his wit is diseased, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must have felt that the rebuke the prince administers to their disrespectful familiarity proves the disease had not affected its vigour. Plausible as are their professions of love, Hamlet's keen insight into character, a quality which we often find coupled with the eccentricity of intellectual natures, at once divines that they are in reality playing him false. The entry of Polonius gives him an opportunity of indulging in mischievous banter of the unfortunate Lord Chamberlain; his expression—

> They fool me to the top of my bent,

shows how he enjoys the joke. Directly he is alone, he is again serious, proving that, amidst all the wild humour in which he indulges his overburdened mind, he never entirely

* See Appendix G.

forgets that great purpose which he has in view; he braces up his nerves for the interview with his mother, and once more he seems on the point of that decisive action which would fulfil the solemn duty that his father's spirit has imposed on him.

We come now to a scene rarely, if ever, represented on the stage, but which forms a foundation for the most plausible attacks that have been made on the character of Hamlet. The King informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they must prepare for immediate departure to England in company with Hamlet—

> The terms of our estate may not endure
> Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
> Out of his lunacies.

They answer in a most becoming spirit of obedience: to them, who ever wore the crown and kingly robes, let them adorn what villany they might, wore the same title to respect and implicit obedience which the dignity of virtue alone should command. When the King is by himself, he gives expression to that remorse which was secretly preying on his heart. The distinction between repentance and remorse is most clearly and beautifully drawn—

> But O, what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder?
> That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
> May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?
> In the corrupted currents of this world,
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law: But 'tis not so above;
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
> To give in evidence. What then? what rests?
> Try what repentance can: what can it not?
> Yet what can it when one can not repent?
> O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
> O limed soul, that struggling to be free
> Art more engaged! Help, angels! make assay!
> Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,
> Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!
> All may be well."

While he is kneeling in the agony of prayer which is stifled by the consciousness of its insincerity, Hamlet enters unseen by the King; he then speaks the lines which certainly betray a spirit of diabolical revenge. No doubt commentators have not ransacked contemporary literature of that day in vain for instances of similar ferocity; the desire had

been expressed by more than one vindictive nature to kill the soul as well as the body. I need not point out to you how impotent such malice is; man may slay his fellow-man unprepared, or even, as in some instances quoted, with a blasphemous denial of God on his lips, extorted from him through fear of death; but the ultimate fate of the soul is in the hands of God alone. The very extravagance of the idea may have struck Shakespeare, and he may have purposely put these horrible words into Hamlet's mouth to show the excess of vindictiveness to which his thoughts would go, out of defiance, as it were, of the timid inertness of his action. Violence of language is not uncommonly found in highly sensitive natures; but very rarely in such natures, except in the moment of extreme passion, is it supplemented by violent deeds. Complete as his conviction of the King's guilt now must be, in face of the opportunity, in sight of the man himself tortured with the agonies of a guilty conscience, Hamlet shrinks from striking the fatal blow. He knows himself, that deliberate murder—murder committed, not in the heat and fury of passion, but with sufficient leisure to allow of reflection, though justified, ever so strongly, by what we may call the natural laws of vengeance—is an act of which he is incapable. The ghost's solemn exhortation to revenge may be ringing in his ears; in thought he is more than capable, in deed he is incapable of executing it; and so he indulges in this discussion with himself, in which, affecting a bloody-mindedness that he could not really feel, he excuses himself for once more putting off the time of action. The reason which he alleges at the end of his speech probably weighed more strongly with him than he was inclined to allow; he had yet to try and wake his mother's conscience; that was a task much more congenial to his nature, much more within his capacity. I do not go so far as to deny that this speech of Hamlet's is revolting to our feelings; it savours of an age when bloodshed and violence were unhappily familiar; it is consistent with the state of rude and imperfect civilisation which existed in the time of which this play treats; it must be admitted as one of the blemishes inseparable from all human work; but I do venture to assert that Shakespeare did not intend us to believe that these horrid sentiments were entertained with any seriousness by the mind of Hamlet.*

We come now to the scene known as the "closet scene," which concludes the third act, and is, perhaps, for more reasons

* See Appendix H.

than one, the most important in the play. The death of Polonius at the hands of Hamlet leads not only to the madness and suicide of Ophelia, but to the final catastrophe of the tragedy. There are three questions involved in this scene which have occasioned much controversy—first, the conduct of Hamlet to his mother; secondly, the amount of guilt with which he is chargeable for the accidental murder of Polonius; and thirdly, how far the Queen was accessory to the murder of her first husband. On all the questions, I hope, by careful examination of the text itself, to throw some light.

We must imagine the Queen in her closet, or oratory; behind the arras which covers the walls Polonius is concealed, ready to hear how Hamlet answers his mother when she takes him roundly to task for his conduct towards his uncle-father. Polonius, by the way, had probably no suspicion of foul play in the case of the elder Hamlet's death; while, as to Gertrude's speedy marriage with her brother-in-law, the political reasons alleged for it would have been quite sufficient excuse, in the old courtier's eyes, for the indecent haste, or the disregard of consanguinity manifested in such a marriage; even supposing that, in his eyes, the King could do any wrong. When, therefore, the Lord Chamberlain counsels the Queen thus—

> Look you lay home to him:
> Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,
> And that your grace hath screen'd and stood between
> Much heat and him—

he thinks that he is giving very excellent and highly moral advice; nor does it occur to him, for one moment, that the eccentric prince, at whose pranks he is so scandalised, may turn the tables upon his august mother. In fact, we may take it for granted that the conduct of Polonius is open to no graver imputations than those of servility and meddlesomeness, faults for which he is too severely punished.

The time is night, and the hour very near that in which his father's ghost first appeared to Hamlet. His first words are those of assumed indifference—

> HAM. Now, mother, what's the matter?
> QU. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

He at once shows her that he has not come to be rebuked, but to rebuke.

> HAM. Mother, you have my father much offended.
> QU. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

She attempts to treat him as if he were still a boy. His answer quickly undeceives her—

HAM. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

She is astonished at the audacity of his manner—

QU. Why, how now, Hamlet!
HAM. What's the matter now?
QU. Have you forgot me?
HAM. No, by the rood, not so:
You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife;
And—would it were not so!—you are my mother.

Even the pathetic tone of reproach in which he utters this word finds no echo in her dulled conscience; she answers with affected indignation and attempted menace—

QU. Nay, then, I'll set those to you that can speak.

Hamlet does not seem to suspect that any spy is in concealment; he stops his mother as she is going towards the King's apartments, and gently forcing her into the chair, speaks to her with a dignity which the consciousness of his solemn mission gives him—

HAM. Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

She mistakes the solemn earnestness of his manner for the dreadful purpose of insanity—

QU. What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?
Help, help, ho!

Polonius echoes the call for help from behind the arras; Hamlet springs almost ferociously to the spot whence he has heard the voice, with the cry—

How now! a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!

as he plunges the sword through the arras. So excited is he that he fails to recognise the voice of Polonius, and when his mother exclaims—

O me, what hast thou done?

he answers—

Nay, I know not: is it the king?

The intense eagerness with which he utters this question is the key to the apparent strangeness of his conduct. We have seen him, but a short while ago, gazing on the figure of the King as he knelt in the agony of barren prayer; we have seen him in the presence of an opportunity, which might

never occur again, of revenging his father's death by slaying his murderer without the chance of interruption; we have seen him then stop to argue with himself, and to elaborate the most bloodthirsty cruelty in his mind, while his sword lay harmless in his motionless hand; but now, when the object of his hate is concealed from his sight, he strikes blindly, upon the impulse of the moment; and the very idea that he has thus, in spite of his own weakness, in spite of his fatal inertness, accomplished the deed he had so long contemplated, and fulfilled the solemn charge, for his faithlessness to which he had so bitterly reproached himself, fills him with a joy which, even in the presence of her whose husband he thinks he has slain, he cannot conceal.

The Queen exclaims with genuine horror—

> O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!

To which Hamlet, who has gone up towards the arras, turning round, answers somewhat sharply,

> A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother,
> As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

This, as more than one commentator has observed, is most probably a tentative reproach uttered by Hamlet as an experiment on his mother's conscience; the Queen's answer—

> As kill a king!

must, I think, be held to be entirely free from any taint of hypocrisy, and should be uttered with simple earnestness. Hamlet now lifts up the arras and discovers Polonius. He is too much engrossed by the great work which he has in hand—the awakening of his mother's conscience to a full sense of her guilt—all the powers of his mind are too intent upon this purpose to allow of his expressing his sorrow at the fatal mistake which he has made. And I must here remind you of what I have said before, that Hamlet's whole nature is so absorbed by the indignation which he feels at his father's murder, that he regards all persons who in any way countenance the murderer, king though he be, and ignorant as they may be of his guilt, as participators in his crime.

He now comes back to the Queen, who stands wringing her hands in helpless agitation—

> Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down,
> And let me wring your heart: for so I shall,
> If it be made of penetrable stuff;
> If damned custom have not brass'd it so,
> That it be proof and bulwark against sense.

The answer of the Queen—

> What have I done, that thou darest wag thy tongue
> In noise so rude against me?

affords still further proof that she had no guilty consciousness of complicity in the murder of her husband; but the amazing insensibility which she displays with regard to her scarcely less serious crime, infidelity to that husband, both during his lifetime and after his death, fully justifies the language in which Hamlet addresses her—

> Such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls Virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
> And sets a blister there; makes marriage vows
> As false as dicers' oaths.

Still the blindness of her misplaced passion, or the obstinacy of her woman's vanity, stifles the voice of shame. It is only after Hamlet has drawn in most earnest and poetic words the contrast between her dead husband and her living one;* it is only when he has relentlessly laid bare the extremity of her degradation, that she cries out in the agony of a tardily awakened conscience—

> O Hamlet, speak no more:
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.

His indignation has mastered him, and he cannot stop; he justly insists upon her having aggravated her guilt by continuance in it. In her renewed cry for mercy she repeats almost the same expression that Hamlet had used before, when preparing himself for this interview†—

> These words like daggers enter in my ears;
> No more, sweet Hamlet!

But the picture he has conjured up of the successful murderer and adulterer lashes him into a fury of invective, in the very midst of which he is interrupted by the entry of the Ghost, clad now, not in complete armour, but in the ordinary dress of every day, or rather, as the stage direction has it in the first Quarto (1603), "*in his night gowne*," as if he were going to the bed that his wife had so cruelly dishonoured.

The appearance of the Ghost in this scene is essentially different, in every point, both to its first appearance in the pre-

* See Appendix K.

† I will speak daggers to her, but use none.

sence of Marcellus, Horatio, and Bernardo, and to its second in the presence of Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus. On both these occasions the apparition was visible to every one present, though it refused to speak until alone with Hamlet. Now the ghost is seen and heard by Hamlet alone. To the Queen both the form of the spectre, and the words it speaks, are but as empty air. In the former scene, as in this, Hamlet, on first seeing the apparition, calls on the angels for protection; but whereas before the words of his prayer were

> Angels and ministers of grace defend *us!*

they are now

> Save *me*, and hover o'er *me* with your wings,
> You heavenly guards!

The use of the singular number may be accidental; on the other hand it may show that he was sensible that this visitation of his father's spirit was directed to him alone. Hamlet asks,

> What would your gracious figure?

but he does not wait for the answer; he is too conscious of his weakness and procrastination; he does not heed the Queen's exclamation,

> Alas, he's mad!

but he continues at once—

> Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
> That lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
> The important acting of your dread command?
> O, say!

The ghost has only one speech, the first part of which is a solemn but gentle rebuke:—

> Do not forget: this visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.

There is no special command to kill the King; the anxiety of the noble spirit is directed towards another end:—

> But look, amazement on thy mother sits:
> O, step between her and her fighting soul:
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works:
> Speak to her, Hamlet.

We must take "conceit" here to mean "imagination," though this interpretation does not make the gist of the passage very clear to me; the line—

> O, step between her and her fighting soul

would certainly seem to support the meaning which I would

attribute to this portion of the speech—namely, that the anxiety of the ghost is mainly directed towards the thorough awakening of the Queen's conscience, so as to bring her to repentance; but it would be more consistent with this interpretation if the word "conceit" expressed "caprice," or "vanity," more than "imagination." It may be that Shakespeare intended to represent the spirit of the elder Hamlet as retaining so much of the tenderness of his nature, that it could not bear to witness the terrible alarm, into which Gertrude was thrown by the sight of Hamlet holding discourse with what seemed to be "the incorporal air;" and that therefore the ghost earnestly bids Hamlet speak to her, in order to convince her that this conduct, which seems so inexplicable to her, is not the result of madness. Perhaps both explanations are equally true; and the intention of this speech may embrace both these objects. Certain it is that the immediate result of this second visitation on Hamlet is to make him much more gentle in appealing to his mother's feelings, and more earnest and definite in his repudiation of insanity.

The Queen's next speech shows us that the actor at this point needs all his skill to express the agitation which she describes—

> Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep;
> And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,
> Your bedded hairs, like life in excrements,
> Start up and stand an end. O gentle son,
> Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
> Sprinkle cool patience.

Hamlet's appeal to the ghost is most pathetic—

> Do not look upon me,
> Lest with this piteous action you convert
> My stern effects: then what I have to do
> Will want true colour; tears perchance for blood.

These words point to the fact that he had already developed in his mind a distinct counterplot to that treacherous device of the King, the sending him away to England, as we shall see towards the end of this scene.

Brief as is the space for which the ghost appears, the effect produced by his appearance is no less solemn than in the first act; and the opportunities afforded the actor are greater than on that occasion. Hamlet follows with his eyes the supernatural figure, and when it has passed through the door, breaks away from his mother's hold, and throws himself on his knees at the spot where the spirit disappears, as if he would try to catch at its robe and detain it. Still

Gertrude does not believe any the more in the reality of the apparition—

> Qu. This is the very coinage of your brain :
> This bodiless creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.

The word "ecstasy" (which means alienation of the mind) recalls Hamlet to himself; he at once undeceives her—

> . . . It is not madness
> That I have utter'd: . . . .
> . . . Mother, for love of grace,
> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks ;
> It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
> Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
> Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven ;
> Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,
> And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
> To make them ranker.

She cannot resist the earnest eloquence of this appeal—

> O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
> Ham. O, throw away the worser part of it,
> And live the purer with the other half.

Never was a nobler sermon preached than is embodied in these speeches ; they are instinct with the truest and purest morality that knows of no compromise with evil : the repentance to which Hamlet urges his mother is not that weak substitute for repentance which the frailty of our nature is too ready to adopt : tears, and sighs, and groans, expressions of sorrow, however deeply felt, are no atonement for sin ; the penitence which Hamlet preaches is that summed up in those sacred words, "Go and sin no more."

> Once more, good night :
> And when you are desirous to be blest,
> I'll blessing beg of you.

And after a solemn expression of sorrow for the violent death of Polonius—

> So again, good night.
> I must be cruel, only to be kind :
> Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind.

In the representation of the play this scene is very wisely concluded here ; what follows is an anti-climax of the worst description, so far as the stage is concerned, though containing most interesting matter for the student.

As regards the first of the three questions involved in this scene, that of Hamlet's conduct to his mother, however lacking in respect it may be, we must remember both the

revolting nature of her crime and the utter want of contrition which, hitherto, she had displayed. Hamlet had, until now, refrained from reproaching her; though he was certainly justified in doing so, both in respect of the ordinary duty of a son to a father—a duty which renders any outrage on the father's honour equally an outrage on that of the son—and in respect of the solemn charge imposed upon him by the supernatural visitation which he had received. It is probable, although he does not mention such intention, that Hamlet contemplated producing a strong effect upon his mother's feelings in the play-scene; and when he found that she had sent for him only to rebuke him for his conduct to his uncle, his indignation would very naturally be roused to such an extent as to overpower his courtesy. It is evident, both from the manner and the matter of his speech, that he considers himself, in thus vividly representing to Gertrude the nature of her guilt, to be fulfilling a mission with which he had been charged, indirectly, by the Deity. He has previously, in the scene with Ophelia, assumed the same lofty position, in those words—

> **I say we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are.**

This is the language of one who believes himself charged with a power and authority greater than those of an ordinary mortal. But we have a stronger proof of this in the words which he uses in expressing his repentance for the death of Polonius—

> **For this same lord (*pointing to Polonius*)**
> **I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,**
> **To punish me with this, and this with me,**
> **That I must be their scourge and minister.**

It accords with the earnest character of Hamlet, no less than with the nature of such a sacred mission as he claims, to show no scruple or delicacy in laying bare the hideousness of the double crime committed against his father, to one part of which his mother was more than accessory. The utter indifference to all sense of right and wrong exhibited by those who surrounded Claudius and his Queen; the despicable servility with which they acquiesced in his reaping the fruits of his brother's sudden death—granting they did not suspect him of having caused it—and in her shameless disregard of what, even in that time of imperfect civilisation, may be called the ordinary decencies of conduct, must have exasperated so loving and loyal a son as Hamlet, even had he been of a dis-

position less sensitive. When we consider, then, the circumstances of the case, and the character of Hamlet, we cannot call his conduct unnatural, because, in his endeavours to wake his mother's torpid conscience to a sense of her guilt, he uses language at once so plain and so vehement that it left no room for prevarication, or affected misunderstanding. There is nothing selfish, or paltry, in Hamlet's indignation; he barely alludes to the usurpation of which he has been the victim; it is the outrage on his father's love and honour that he resents so fiercely, the shameless impenitence of his mother he rebukes so sternly.

With regard to the second question, the amount of guilt incurred by Hamlet through killing Polonius in mistake for the King, there can be no doubt that the mistake was a genuine one; the rash haste, displayed by Hamlet, was the result of that feverish desire for vengeance which was intensified by the consciousness of his inability to execute such vengeance deliberately; therefore, as I have before implied, he snatches at the opportunity, which seems to offer itself, of killing Claudius on the impulse of the moment, and, as it were, in the dark. Nor is the fate of Polonius so undeserved as at first sight it appears; we well might wonder—did not the history of every age and every nation multiply instance upon instance of such selfish cowardice—we well might pronounce incredible and impossible the utter indifference shown by Polonius and the whole court to the crimes of Claudius. We must remember that his usurpation was successful; having stolen the crown, he contrived to keep it, and so long as he kept it, and no longer, would his incestuous marriage, his treachery to his brother, his injustice to his nephew, be alike endorsed and encouraged by those who could profit by his favour, or suffer from his anger. Fidelity to our allegiance is only a virtue as long as he who claims such allegiance is glorified by the sun of prosperity; let rebellion grow to revolution and be crowned by success, and the ruler, before whom all bowed the knee with ready subservience, becomes the object of our derision, if not of our violence; then the adherence to him, or to his descendants, which once was loyalty, deserving of the highest rewards that the State could bestow, becomes the plotting, or the treason which, in the eyes of the successful rebels now exalted into high-minded patriots, merits only the prison or the halter.

Thirdly, as to the question of Gertrude's connivance at, or complicity in, the murder of her first husband, I think we may

safely come to the conclusion that she can be charged with neither. Certainly her language in this scene, unless we suppose her to be guilty of almost superhuman hypocrisy, tends most decidedly to acquit her of such a charge; but we have more direct evidence on this point in the 14th scene of the Quarto (1603*), no vestige of which is found in the later editions; the Queen, speaking of the King to Horatio, says,

> Then I perceiue there's treason in his lookes
> That seem'd to sugar o're his villanie:
> But I will soothe and please him for a time,
> For murderous mindes are always jealous,

and still more strongly in this very scene in the same edition, when the Queen speaks thus, after the disappearance of the ghost,

> But as I haue a soule, I sweare by heauen,
> I neuer knew of this most horride murder:

A little further, in answer to Hamlet's appeal,

> And mother, but assist mee in reuenge,
> And in his death your infamy shall die,

The Queen answers—

> Hamlet, I vow by that maiesty,
> That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our hearts,
> I will conceale, consent, and doe my best,
> What stratagem soe're thou shalt deuise.†

From these passages, supported as they are by the prose history of Hamlet on which the play was founded, and never contradicted by any passage in the play as afterwards revised by Shakespeare himself, no less than from the character of the Queen as it is developed in the following scenes, we may confidently acquit her alike of guilty knowledge or of wilful ignorance of the vile crime committed by Claudius against his brother's life, though in that against his honour she was the weak and shameless accomplice.

The latter portion of this scene, which is never represented on the stage, is very much expanded from its original form in the Quarto of 1603; I give in the Appendix,‡ side by side, the two versions of this scene from the point of the ghost's

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* The play in this, its earliest and imperfect form, is not divided into acts.

† In the play as it now stands, the Queen pledges herself not to reveal to the King that Hamlet's madness is feigned, in the following words—

> QUEEN. Be thou assured, if words be made of breath
> And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
> What thou hast said to me.

‡ See Appendix L.

entrance, in order that comparison between them may be easier. The passage relating to the body of Polonius—

> This man shall set me packing :
> I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
> Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor
> Is now most still, most secret and most grave,
> Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
> Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you—

has been much censured for its coarseness, and even for the affected brutality with which Hamlet speaks of the corpse of him for whose death he has, a short time before, expressed what seemed to be genuine contrition. I confess I do not understand why Shakespeare thought it necessary to add anything here to what he had originally written ; but we must remember, as has been pointed out by the commentators, that the word "guts" was not in Shakespeare's time the abominable vulgarism that it is now ; and that the rude stage appointments, and limited numbers of the company, necessitated the removal of the body by one of the characters on the stage. Numerous instances of this will be found in the Notes to Staunton's edition of Shakespeare.

There are two points of much greater importance which must be noticed : the first is the promise given by the Queen, which I have already quoted, that she would not betray Hamlet's secret to the King, a promise which she most faithfully kept. The second point is the remarkable language in which Hamlet speaks of his coming journey to England.

> HAM. I must to England ; you know that ?
> QU. Alack,
> I had forgot : 'tis so concluded on.
> HAM. There's letters seal'd : and my two schoolfellows,
> Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
> They bear the mandate ; they must sweep my way,
> And marshal me to knavery. Let it work ;
> For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
> Hoist with his own petar : and't shall go hard
> But I will delve one yard below their mines,
> And blow them at the moon :

It would certainly seem that Hamlet, suspecting that this mission to England concealed some treachery on the part of the King, had already determined to defeat that treachery by cunning ; and to visit upon the heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern their complicity, conscious or unconscious, in the scheme. The words, "They bear the mandate," would seem to anticipate the discovery which Hamlet afterwards made regarding the nature of the commission with which they were charged ; whether we are to take this as an oversight on

Shakespeare's part, or whether we should understand Hamlet to be speaking of suspicion as if it were certainty, I cannot myself determine; nor do I find the slightest notice of this passage in any of the numerous commentaries which I have examined.* The next words—

> they must sweep my way,
> And marshal me to knavery,

are difficult to interpret. They may mean that Hamlet was so certain that his suspicion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was well-founded, that he determined to be revenged upon them; and, by this act of severity, to strengthen his mind for the more important purpose he had in hand, namely the killing of the King. If he could conquer his weakness, and subdue his scruples of conscience sufficiently to work upon these two false-hearted courtiers a most signal act of vengeance; and granting that he should, before doing so, be able to assure himself that Claudius, in sending him to England, was sending him to a treacherous death; he might naturally hope, should he succeed in returning safe to Denmark, to find himself no longer hesitating for one moment to fulfil, to the uttermost point, the ghost's charge of vengeance.

The whole effect of this scene, apart from its intrinsic beauty of language and grandeur of conception, is to raise our interest to a much higher point; and I cannot agree with those who consider that at this point the play ought to have ended; however elaborate may be the episodes, which somewhat check the progress of the main action in the two last acts, our curiosity, as to what is to follow, is so skilfully whetted in this scene, that a more abrupt conclusion to the play would be as ineffective as it would be inartistic.

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* See Additional Notes, No. 5.

PART III.

THE fourth act opens with a short but significant scene: the persons present are the King, the Queen, Rosencrantz, and Guidenstern. The Queen has evidently just returned from her interview with Hamlet. In fact, the action at this point of the play is continuous. The King speaks first:—

KING. There's matter in these sighs, these profound heaves:
You must translate: 'tis fit we understand them.
Where is your son?
QUEEN. Bestow this place on us a little while.
[*Exeunt* ROSENCRANTZ *and* GUILDENSTERN.

What the Queen has to reveal is for the King's ears alone; not even the supple fidelity of the two courtiers entitles them to the privilege of being admitted into the royal confidence. When they are gone the Queen continues:—

Ah, mine own lord, what have I seen to-night!
KING. What, Gertrude? How does Hamlet?
QUEEN. Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend
Which is the mightier: in his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries "a rat, a rat!"
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.

This speech is certainly, at first sight, a most puzzling one; we have just heard Gertrude give her son the most solemn assurance that she will not reveal to his uncle the fact that his madness is assumed; therefore we must understand that she is now deliberately deceiving Claudius, and affecting to believe in the reality of Hamlet's madness. Otherwise it would seem that the Queen had only pretended to believe her son was not mad, and that she was now giving his uncle fresh cause to put some restraint on him. The meaning of her conduct becomes much more intelligible on reference to the Quarto of 1603.

In that edition a subsequent scene between the Queen and Horatio,* to which I have before alluded, makes it clear that the author's intention was to represent the Queen now as helping Hamlet's counterplots against the treachery of Claudius. In order to do this, she could adopt no better device than to pretend a most thorough belief in the genuineness of her son's madness, knowing, as we have seen, from the latter part of the preceding act, she did, that Hamlet had determined to go to England agreeably to the advice, or rather the command, of Claudius.

As doubts and fears of discovery thicken around the guilty Claudius, his sententious bursts of plausible hypocrisy become more and more specious. He overflows with nice morality. It would seem as if, not content with treacherously robbing his brother of his crown, his Queen, and his life, he had also pilfered his philosophy. Listen to his exquisite and pathetic complaint :—

> Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answer'd !
> It will be laid to us, whose providence
> Should have kept short, restrain'd and out of haunt,
> This mad young man : but so much was our love,
> We would not understand what was most fit,
> But, like the owner of a foul disease,
> To keep it from divulging, let it feed
> Even on the pith of life.

We almost feel inclined to bring out our handkerchiefs and weep for this poor injured uncle, whose impracticable nephew was always trying his angelic patience, till at last even its limit was reached, and it could endure no more, The first actor who has the courage to represent Claudius as the plausible smiling villain he really was, with features so expanded by conviviality that even the pangs he suffered from the ingratitude of his dear brother's son, whom he loved with such a disinterested love, "could grave no wrinkle there ;" who attempts to realise Shakespeare's conception, so exquisitely sarcastic, yet so true to nature, instead of representing the seducer of Gertrude as a beetle-browed villain, on whose brain and shoulders all the melodramas for the last fifty years seem to have left their fearful weight—the first actor who has courage to effect this innovation will, I venture to predict, create at once a great sensation and a greater success.

The Queen's next speech contains a beautiful touch ; in answer to the inquiry of Claudius, where Hamlet is gone, she says :—

* See Appendix M.

To draw apart the body he hath kill'd:
o'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
Shows itself pure; he weeps for what is done.

This shows that Hamlet's affectation of something which seemed like brutality, at the end of the last scene, was not long sustained; and that the suffering of his gentle nature, when the excitement under which he had committed this misdirected deed of violence had passed away, was greater than he cared to show before those whom he wished to believe in his assumption of insanity. Claudius has not yet exhausted his vein of moral indignation—

this vile deed
We must, with all our majesty and skill,
Both countenance and excuse.

The two courtiers are summoned back—

Ho, Guildenstern!

It is a remarkable fact, that the inseparability of these two charming young men is so great, that it is only necessary to call one for both to appear. They remind us of nothing so much as of a well-fed pair of lap-dogs, each so jealous of the other that neither will let his companion out of his sight, in case he should receive a greater share of caresses and food from their master's hand. They are commissioned to seek Hamlet out, to find where he has put the body, and bring it into the chapel. The King's last words in this scene, addressed to Gertrude, foreshadow the tragic events that are near at hand—

O, come away!
My soul is full of discord and dismay. [*Exeunt.*

The next scene, a very short one, commences with Hamlet's entrance from the lobby where he has placed the body of Polonius, with the words—

Safely stowed.

The voices of the two concordant courtiers are heard from within, calling—

Hamlet! Lord Hamlet!

Hamlet hears, but apparently does not recognise them. It is not very clear what Shakespeare's intention is in this scene, to which we find no parallel in the earliest edition of the play (4to, 1603), the greater portion of the dialogue which follows being embodied in that edition with the second scene of the third act. Hamlet could never have believed that by hiding the body of Polonius he could conceal the circum-

stances of the hapless Lord Chamberlain's death; it is more probable that his conduct, at this point, is regulated by the desire to keep up the assumption of madness than by any other purpose. Certain it is that on the entrance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he assumes towards them an ironical incoherence, very different from the rational sarcasm with which he had hitherto treated them.

ROS. What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?
HAM. Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin.
ROS. Tell us where 'tis, that we may take it thence
And bear it to the chapel.
HAM. Do not believe it.
ROS. Believe what?
HAM. That I can keep your counsel and not mine own. Besides, to be demanded of a sponge!* what replication should be made by the son of a king?
ROS. Take you me for a sponge, my lord?
HAM. Ay, sir; that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the king best service in the end; he keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw; first mouthed, to be last swallowed: when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again.
ROS. I understand you not, my lord.
HAM. I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.
ROS. My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the king.
HAM. The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing—
GUIL. A thing, my lord?
HAM. Of nothing: bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after. [*Exeunt.*

We need only compare the above with Hamlet's language to these same courtiers immediately after the play scene, to see that he gives rein to his eccentric humour more completely than he has yet done in the presence of any one, except Polonius.

In the next scene the King enters, attended. The speech, which he addresses to those about him, is a kind of apology for the leniency which he has shown towards Hamlet.† The King has a very difficult part to play; he dares not leave unpunished such a deed of violence as Hamlet has committed in killing Polonius; at the same time he dares not openly punish Hamlet on account of his popularity: so he remains between two dilemmas, and though the course which he takes is, in his position, the safest one, he does not succeed, as we shall see further on, in exonerating himself from the suspicion

* The comparison of courtiers to a sponge is found in other works of this period. See Additional Note, No. 5A.
† In the Quarto, 1603, this speech, or, rather, the speech which corresponds to it, is addressed to the Queen alone. See Appendix N.

of complicity in the killing of Polonius. Had his conscience been free as regarded his late brother, had his assumption of the throne been the consequence of a legal vote on the part of the people, and not a half-condoned usurpation, his course would have been very simple; he would have commanded Hamlet to be tried before a proper court, and the circumstances of the Lord Chamberlain's death would have been fully investigated; but this he could not do, because no inquiry could take place without subjecting him to the danger of discovery with regard to that crime, of which he now must have known that Hamlet more than suspected him. Under all these circumstances the device of sending Hamlet to England was the most ingenious that Claudius could adopt. He made it appear to the courtiers, on the one hand, as a measure taken for the safety of the State, and to Hamlet, on the other hand, as one taken for his individual safety—

KING. Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety,
Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve
For that which thou hast done, must send thee hence
With fiery quickness: therefore prepare thyself;
The bark is ready and the wind at help,
The associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.
HAM. For England?
KING. Ay, Hamlet.
HAM. Good.
KING. So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Hamlet's answer here is worthy of remark, as taken in connection with that declaration of his purpose with regard to this expedition to England, which he had made to his mother at the end of the scene which concludes the last act—

HAM. I see a cherub that sees them. But, come; for England! Farewell, dear mother.
KING. Thy loving father, Hamlet.
HAM. My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother. Come, for England! [*Exit.*

Hamlet cannot carry his hypocrisy so far as to pretend any cordiality towards Claudius. However slow his arm may be, his tongue at least is quick to wound the murderer of his father.

The last speech of the King in this scene, of which the four first lines are addressed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is of considerable importance as bearing on the question, whether they had any guilty knowledge of the purport of the despatches which they were taking from Claudius to the

Government of England;* the words addressed to them are—

> Follow him at foot; tempt him with speed aboard;
> Delay it not; I'll have him hence to-night:
> Away! for everything is seal'd and done
> That else leans on the affair: pray you, make haste.

It is not till they are gone, and he is alone, that the King confesses his treacherous purpose, and that the commission given to the two courtiers contained "an exact command," as Hamlet afterwards calls it, that his nephew's head should be instantly struck off. I do not see how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can be supposed to have known for certain the purpose on which they were sent; but had they been true to their early friendship for Hamlet, and loyal to the young prince, who should have been their king, and was, by the acknowledgment of his usurping uncle, the heir to the crown; if they had not been false to the nobler duties of friend and subject alike, they would never have undertaken the mission at all. It is impossible they could have believed that, in sending Hamlet to England, the King was really consulting anything but his own safety.

It will be more convenient to examine, at this point, such defence of his conduct towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as Hamlet makes when narrating his adventures to Horatio in Act V., Scene 2. The scene commences thus:—

> HAM. So much for this, sir: now shall you see the other.

Of what Hamlet had been previously speaking we do not know exactly; most probably, judging from the letter to Horatio (see Act IV., Scene 6), he had been giving his friend a more detailed account of his adventure with, and capture by, the pirates. The letter ends thus:—

> "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb; yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter. . . . . Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England: of them I have much to tell thee."

It is evident that Hamlet attached great importance to the news which he had to tell, and that, although he had all along suspected the King of some treacherous purpose in sending him to England, and had resolved to run the risk of going there with a hope of discovering that same treachery, yet, when his suspicions were so completely confirmed, he felt the same kind of painful satisfaction, and half-delighted agitation, which he displayed after the revelation made to him by his

* See Additional Notes, No. 6.

father's ghost, though, in that case, those feelings were then mingled with a horror, which is lacking here. We may, however, note this feature in Hamlet's character, that while he is very ready to suspect some evil purpose in the minds of those about him, and though these suspicions are in most cases justified by the event, he receives the confirmation of them with as much astonishment as if he had never had any suspicion at all. There is something of childish exultation at the proofs of his shrewdness; there is also that which shows us that his cynicism was of the mind and not of the heart—that however ill he thought of the world in general, his indignation against particular instances of evil-doing was in no degree blunted.

Hamlet continues—

> You do remember all the circumstance?

To which Horatio replies, as if the very suspicion of forgetfulness on this subject was intolerable—

> Remember it, my lord!

What was the circumstance, or, as we should say, what were the circumstances, to which Hamlet alludes? I suppose they were the circumstances under which he left Denmark; that is to say, just after the accidental killing of Polonius, the agitating interview with his mother, the reappearance of the ghost "to whet his blunted purpose;" add to these the increased fear and suspicion with which the King evidently regarded him, and the small chance which, at the time of his departure, there seemed to be that Hamlet would ever accomplish the task of revenge which had been set him. All these circumstances would naturally agitate his mind, and heighten the apprehension of treachery which he felt. Hamlet thus continues his narrative:—

> Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
> That would not let me sleep: methought I lay
> Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,*
> And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
>
> HOR. That is most certain.
>
> HAM. Up from my cabin,
> My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark
> Groped I to find out them;† had my desire,

* The long parenthesis here will be observed by the careful reader. The sentence would run, "Rashly, up from my cabin," &c., or the parenthesis may begin, as suggested by Seymour ("Remarks," &c., Vol. II., p. 200), at the words, "let us know."

† See Additional Notes, No. 7.

Finger'd their packet, and in fine withdrew
To mine own room again ; making so bold,
My fears forgetting manners, to unseal
Their grand commission ; where I found, Horatio,—
O royal knavery !—an exact command,
Larded with many several sorts of reasons,
Importing Denmark's health and England's too,
With, ho ! such bugs and goblins in my life,
That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,
No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,
My head should be struck off.

The tone in which Hamlet speaks of the treacherous plot against his life, which he had so opportunely discovered, is throughout one of gleeful irony ; it would seem he had never communicated his suspicions to Horatio, who receives his narrative with expressions of unaffected astonishment. Hamlet thus continues the account of his proceedings :—

Being thus be-netted round with villanies,—
Or I could make a prologue to my brains,*
They had begun the play,—I sat me down ;
Devised a new commission ; wrote it fair :
I once did hold it, as our statists do,
A baseness to write fair, and labour'd much
How to forget that learning ; but, sir, now
It did me yeoman's service : wilt thou know
The effect of what I wrote ?

HOR. Ay, good my lord.

HAM. An earnest conjuration from the king,
As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them like the palm might flourish,
As peace should still her wheaten garland wear
And stand a comma 'tween their amities,
And many such-like 'As'es of great charge,
That, on the view and knowing of these contents,
Without debatement further, more or less,
He should the bearers put to sudden death,
Not shriving-time allow'd.

HOR. How was this seal'd ?

HAM. Why, even in that was heaven ordinant.
I had my father's signet in my purse,
Which was the model of that Danish seal :
Folded the writ up in the form of the other ;
Subscribed it ; gave't the impression ; placed it safely,
The changeling never known. Now, the next day
Was our sea-fight ; and what to this was sequent
Thou know'st already.

The language of Hamlet indicates great excitement, and, as I have said before, it is characterised by a childish exultation in the success of his strategy. That he should have thus craftily obtained, at the same time, such strong proofs of the King's treachery, and so ready a means of avenging himself on the two time-serving courtiers who had been so faith-

* See Additional Notes, No. 8.

less to their professed friendship for him, seems to have produced no other impression on his mind than one of delighted self-satisfaction; no gratitude to Providence for his almost miraculous escape from so imminent a danger finds a place in his heart; and we feel almost disgusted for the moment at what strikes us, at first sight, as a mixture of malice and vanity. But let us read a little further on :—

HOR. Why, what a king is this !
HAM. Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king, and whored my mother ;
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes ;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm ? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil ?
HOR. It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.
HAM. It will be short : the interim is mine ;
And a man's life's no more than to say "One."

We see now that Hamlet is really trying to justify to his own conscience the revenge which he has never been able to accomplish. As I have pointed out before, his great difficulty is to bring himself to commit an open act of homicide ; he could kill the King on the spur of the moment, when he thought he was hid behind the arras, but not when he was kneeling before his eyes. He professes to regard the task of revenging his father's murder as a sacred duty imposed on him by a supernatural visitation, and justified by the corroborating evidence of the murderer's demeanour during the play scene. If there could be anything wanting to remove all merciful scruples from his mind, and to make the life of Claudius more justly forfeit to him, it was this treacherous attempt on Hamlet's own life; the motive of self-defence was now added to all the others, urging him to lose no time in seizing the sword of justice and striking the decisive blow which should rid the world of such a monster of guilt. But instead of doing so, he still debates the matter over and over again with himself; still wastes his ingenuity in devising more urgent incitements to action while he does nothing; still spends his energy in bitter satire and vigorous denunciations of the murderer; until accident brings the opportunity, until the impulse of passion lends the necessary resolution.

Strange, indeed, is the contrast between his endless self-vindications, as far as the King is concerned, and his utter indifference at the sudden and fearful end he has contrived for the two courtiers. Is it that, because the sea is between

him and his victims, his conscience sees but dimly at such a distance? Some powerful associations with his uncle, dating back, perhaps, to a happy childhood, must have exercised an influence—none the less strong because he would not acknowledge it to himself—over Hamlet's mind. The very pains he takes to add fuel to his hate show that he knew how difficult it was to keep the fire burning.

But I must return to the main point in question; I mean to what extent can we admit Hamlet's narrative as a justification of his conduct towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? The malignant misrepresentation of Hamlet's character, for which Steevens is responsible, has drawn forth many able and indignant vindications of Shakespeare's favourite hero; but while unable to agree with any of Steevens' deductions, I must confess that he seems right in refusing to judge Hamlet by any other evidence than that afforded by the tragedy itself. If we were to admit any circumstances, found only in the original story of Saxo Grammaticus, as exculpating the dramatist from any blemishes in the delineation of his characters, we could not in justice decline to hold him responsible for other circumstances, derived from the same source, which might tell against him; and thus we should be led into all kinds of errors, and should be utterly unable to form any true estimate of Shakespeare's work.

It is useless to deny that in the play of "Hamlet" there is not one line which can be fairly said to prove that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew what were the contents of the packet committed to their care. Hamlet himself does not say they knew it; he expresses his distrust of them in the strongest language to his mother (*see* Act III., Scene 4, lines 202 to 210 inclusive), but all that he says to Horatio now is—

> Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
> . . . . . their defeat
> Does by their own insinuation grow:

and he seems to justify the terrible punishment he had inflicted on them by the very fact that their conduct throughout had been so underhand, and so cunningly false to him as their friend and prince, that although their treachery was undoubted, they had not been openly guilty of any design against his life. Hamlet declares—

> They are not near my conscience;

because he considered that by laying themselves out to serve the King's ends from the very first moment they arrived at Court; by their lack of frankness towards him, their old

schoolfellow, at their first meeting; by their steadily blinding their eyes to the state of affairs at Court, and by denying to the griefs of their friend any sympathy; by readily accepting the theory of his madness without trying to account for his melancholy and retirement from Court in any other manner; by accepting an embassy which their own common sense must have told them could not mean any good to Hamlet, they had been so false to the duties of friendship and to the honour of gentlemen, that they deserved the death of traitors. It must be remembered that in Hamlet's character Shakespeare intended to protest against conventionality of all kinds. As to what the world might think right or wrong, Hamlet cared little: public opinion might justify the usurpation and marriage of Claudius; respectable members of the Court might overlook the indecent haste with which that marriage, really incestuous, was concluded; worthy men of the world might hold it honourable as well as expedient to do the bidding of such a man as Claudius, seeing he was a king; these two well-behaved young gentlemen, who passed for his two most intimate friends, might wonder why Hamlet was so odd and so out of spirits, might choose to forget how he loved his father, might assume that he acquiesced in the dishonour of his mother and in his own disinheritance; others might see nothing to blame in their conduct; but this brave, accomplished, eccentric prince was unlike others in this, that he judged conduct by a higher standard than that of courts, or of the fashionable world; he loved good for its own sake, not for what could be got by it; and in his indignation at the despicable weakness of these two courtiers, in the scorn which he felt for their time-serving cowardice, he allowed himself to be hurried into the commission of an act of cruelty, because, at the time, it wore an appearance of an exquisitely ironical punishment. It is possible that Shakespeare meant to mark, as strongly as he could, the hatred of a noble, honest nature for that complicity in crime which is the result of wilful blindness, and self-interested negligence. The lesson is one which in this age we may all take to heart; and while we shrink from the cruelty which is inseparable from all acts of vengeance, while we are pained to see the treachery of Claudius retorted on his agents with such terrible exactness, we cannot help feeling how dangerous it is to side with evil against good, however high the wages; to shut our eyes to the truth, however unpleasant; to do wrong because the world cries out loudly it is right, and drowns the voice of conscience in the roar of its applause.

The next scene we come to (Act IV., Scene 4), following the regular order of the play, is one which has been omitted almost invariably on the stage. I find that Betterton certainly never attempted it.* Whether his predecessors did we do not know; but the majority of his successors have followed his example. There are, I admit, grave reasons for its omission, though no great actor can study the part of Hamlet without longing to deliver the grand and characteristic soliloquy which it contains. In the first place, the scene is very awkwardly placed as regards time; it comes in the middle of an act, although it is evident that some considerable interval of time must elapse between this and the following scene.† In the second place, the soliloquy makes a very serious demand on the strength of the actor at a time when the most powerful of Hamlets must feel the need of rest; but I cannot help thinking that the latter objection would have been oftener overcome had the speech been of a more "effective" nature from the actor's point of view. Another difficulty is that the scene necessitates the introduction of Fortinbras, who has been mercilessly suppressed in all recent acting editions of the play. The omission of the soliloquy, which seems to me absolutely necessary to the perfect comprehension and appreciation of Hamlet's character, is so much to be deplored, that I would advise the restoration of this scene even at the risk of ending the fourth act here, and of so adding another act to the conventional five, into which, by a most arbitrary system, all tragedies are divided. The subdivision of long acts in operas is constantly practised with great advantage to the audience and to the actors: I confess I cannot see why such a convenient practice should not be extended to the dramatic works of Shakespeare.

Hamlet, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is on his way to the ship which is to bear him to England, there to die by the foulest treachery, of which he has strong suspicions but no certain knowledge. On his way to the place of embarkation he encounters the soldiers of Fortinbras on their march through the dominions of his uncle to the "little patch of ground" which it is their object to conquer from the Poles. Hamlet thus questions a Captain whom Fortinbras has despatched on an embassy to Claudius:—

HAM. Good sir, whose powers are these?
CAP. They are of Norway, sir.
HAM. How purposed, sir, I pray you?
CAP. Against some part of Poland.

* See Additional Notes, No. 9.
† See Additional Notes, No. 10.

HAM. Who commands them, sir?
CAP. The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras.*
HAM. Goes it against the main of Poland, sir,
Or for some frontier?
CAP. Truly to speak, and with no addition,
We go to gain a little patch of ground†
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it;
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
HAM. Why, then the Polack never will defend it.
CAP. Yes, it is already garrison'd.
HAM. Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
Will not debate the question of this straw:
This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies. I humbly thank you, sir.
CAP. God be wi' you, sir. [*Exit.*
ROS. Will't please you go, my lord?
HAM. I'll be with you straight. Go a little before.

I think this scene is devised with the most admirable art. Hamlet is here brought into contact with an extravagant instance of that capacity for action in which he is so painfully deficient: as before, in the case of the player, he was witness of the most violent emotions excited by a fictitious sorrow, so is he now the witness of the most restless activity directed against an object so insignificant in itself, that the most practical and active mind might well ask *cui bono?* Here is the art of the dramatist; for if the object of this expedition led by Fortinbras had been the conquest of some vast and wealthy territory, or the punishment of some gross outrage, or the vindication of some great principle of national honour, the self-reproach excited in Hamlet's soul, the contrast with his own cowardly inertness, would have been less strong. The analytical powers of his mind detect at once the moral of such an incident, as it affects his own character; the morbid self-consciousness which lies at the root of that very incapacity for action, so bitterly, yet so vainly censured by himself—an incapacity which he is ever confessing but never correcting—finds in this rash aggression of the fiery young Fortinbras new food for cynical reflection. He philosophises admirably, resolves most daringly; but carries out his philosophy and executes his resolve most feebly. Let us examine the soliloquy, and we shall see how masterly is the delineation of Hamlet's character, how subtly the workings of such a mind are laid bare before us:—

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,

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* See Appendix O.
† See Additional Notes, No. 11.

If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:
Witness this army, of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great,
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

That wonderful inconsistency, which is the essence of human nature, was never more forcibly pictured than in this grand speech. When we read these words we are astonished at the shrewdness, the incisive criticism, the stupendous common-sense, of the man who could utter them; all that has passed before, surely, was a dream; all hesitation, all procrastination, all scruples of conscience, all tenderness of nature, all horror of violence, all over-sensitiveness as to the justice of revenge, all shrinking from the sternest severity of punishment, must disappear, and the reflective hero will now prove himself the hero of action. Beginning with the two servile and cowardly knaves, the bearers of the treacherous mandate, of whom he will make a terrible example, he will at once go on to the arch-murderer himself, and will expiate with unrelenting vengeance the death and dishonour of his beloved and honoured father, fulfilling to the letter the solemn charge of the perturbed and tortured spirit, and so procuring for it that rest which, while its commands were unheeded, it could never know. We have already seen how such expectation is partly realised; we have yet to see how faithfully Shakespeare

follows out the grand problem of inconsistency which he has set himself. The most tragic element which exists in the world, that irony of events which sets at nought all human purposes, even while it seems to carry out their ends, was never more vividly exemplified than in the catastrophe of this tragedy.

How grand are the opening words of this soliloquy!

> How all occasions do inform against me,
> And spur my dull revenge!

The word "all" should be slightly emphasised here. The striking accident of his meeting these forces, and learning the object of their march, makes him exaggerate the universality with which all events seem to teach him the same lesson. Then follows an epigrammatic condemnation of the mere animal life—of leading which Hamlet could not justly accuse himself. He puts before himself the two alternatives of "bestial oblivion" on one hand, and on the other—

> some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
> A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward,—

from which he may choose the cause of his inaction. There is a wonderful force in these lines—

> I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do,'
> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
> To do't.

There is a relentless insisture in his enumeration of all the requisites and advantages, all the motives and the materials, which he possessed for carrying out the vengeance enjoined him.

Note the contrast in these lines—

> Witness this army, of such mass and charge,
> Led by a delicate and tender prince.

Hamlet pictures Fortinbras as no hardy and brawny warrior, rude of speech and vigorous of frame, but as "a delicate and tender prince," no more richly gifted with the physical qualities which generally distinguish bold and active men than himself. So far as their forms, their nature, their education, are concerned, they are alike; but in their deeds how unlike! Hamlet with every motive that can urge him to swift and forcible action, his father murdered, his mother dishonoured, with the sad reproachful face of that father's

spirit still stamped upon his mind, with the solemn reproaches of that supernatural visitation still sounding in his ears, stands weighing with scrupulous exactness every possible consequence of that which is to be done at once and yet remains undone; while Fortinbras, his

> spirit with divine ambition puff'd,
> Makes mouths at the invisible event,

mockingly defies the future; exposing life, wealth, honour, everything that when exposed to danger is most perishable, to the powers of chance and death, to the countless perils of war; and for what?—

> Even for an egg-shell.

Here is the same thought as in that other great soliloquy:

> What would he do,
> Had he the motivo and the cue for passion
> That I have?

It was, as I have said, only a simulated emotion which raised that bitter reflection; now it is real, positive, action.

The beautiful lines which follow are well known; they ought to be written on every man's heart, for they are the perfect epitome of a noble nature:

> Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honour's at the stake.

What follows has already entered into the paraphrase which I have rashly attempted—for volumes of words could not express more clearly or more forcibly the working of a man's mind than these—but it is worth one's while to observe the intensity of these lines:

> while to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
> That for a fantasy and trick of fame
> Go to their graves like beds.

This last expression is beyond all praise; and the amplification of what the Captain had told him is almost equally fine:

> which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain?

There is in this speech, as it were, a whirlwind of intellectual action which sweeps one along with it—intellectual action I have said, for what is the resolution with which Hamlet concludes?

> O, from this time forth,
> My *thoughts* be bloody, or be nothing worth!

Not "My *deeds* be bloody," as we should have expected; just as before, in the soliloquy already quoted, we had "About my *brain!*" instead of "About, my *hands*" or "*arm!*"* In fact Hamlet is so completely a man of mind, that he acts only with his mind, confusing the source of action with the means of executing it. The first "bloody thought" which he carries out is the putting to death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and this he procures to be done rather than *does*. We might have expected that, on discovering the nature of the royal commission of which they were the bearers, he would have denounced their treachery before the crew of the ship, and have killed them himself; but this was far too simple a course for Hamlet to pursue. He might have, not without reason, dreaded the interference of the officers and men on board the ship, who would be more likely to side with Claudius than with Hamlet; but such a direct plan of action probably never even occurred to him, for he was fascinated by the ingenuity, and intellectual vindictiveness, of the device which he adopted. But upon this subject I have already remarked at considerable length. I have only reverted to it here, in order to show how the aversion of Hamlet's nature to direct and plain action is admirably maintained by Shakespeare, even when he seems to have begun to act and ceased to reflect.

For a time we leave Hamlet, embarked on a dangerous journey, surrounded by treachery, from which chance, more than any effort of his own, delivers him, and brings him back again to Elsinore at a most critical moment. The story now follows the hapless fate of Ophelia, and we witness the first of a long series of tragic events which spring from the violent death of Polonius.

* See Gervinus' admirable criticism on that soliloquy (at end of Act II.), in which he enlarges on this point (vol. ii., page 136, Bunnett's Authorised Translation), though, as I have observed in Appendix E, the expression is not so out of place as, at first sight, it seems.

PART IV.

We may take the interval, which elapses between the scene we are now considering (Act IV., Scene 5) and the one before it, as at least one month, and probably more.

During this time the hurried and secret funeral of Polonius had taken place; Hamlet had sailed with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for England; Ophelia, crushed by the terrible blows, coming at the same moment, of her father's sudden and mysterious death and her lover's equally sudden departure without a word of explanation, had, while yet her mind remained sufficiently clear, at once despatched a messenger to her brother to summon him from France; the people, meanwhile, from whom the tragic end of Polonius and the virtual banishment of Hamlet could not long be concealed, had begun to murmur strange suspicions and to lend a ready ear to vague and disquieting rumours; this uneasy and discontented frame of mind was aggravated by the madness of Ophelia, and fanned into open revolt by the arrival of Laertes, furious with rage, and crying loud for vengeance against those who were responsible for his father's violent death and hasty, disrespectful, interment. I have spoken of the first part of this scene elsewhere,* so that it is only necessary to notice here—first, how the Queen seems to treat Horatio with more respect and confidence, because she has become aware with how much trust and love he was regarded by Hamlet; next, that her son's reproaches had effectually awakened her conscience, as is evident from the words that she utters to herself—

> (*Aside.*) To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
> It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

* See Appendix D.

This is the first instance of self-reproach that we find in her. Claudius seems, for the moment, somewhat humanised by the sorrows that have come so thick upon both of them, and shows signs of tenderness in the presence of the wretched, distracted, Ophelia. But there is no sign of genuine repentance. With marvellously placid hypocrisy he speaks of Hamlet's removal from the country as if he had not given the treacherous mandate for his death; he laments his short-sightedness in yielding to the first impulse of fear and causing the body of Polonius to be interred in "hugger-mugger;" but he does not hint at the real cause of such imprudent haste, namely, the danger that any inquiry into the circumstances of the old courtier's death might lead to very inconvenient disclosures, and might betray the nature of the mistake through which that death had taken place. It may be noted here that Polonius would seem to have been popular: for the people resented his "obscure funeral" as well as his unexplained death; they seem to have felt no anger against Hamlet, but rather to have believed that Claudius, for his own ends, had got rid of the minister who was most regarded by them, and to whose hearty support it was very probably owing that the succession of that king to the throne had been so little disputed.

The last words of this speech of Claudius —

> O my dear Gertrude, this,
> Like to a murdering-piece, in many places
> Gives me superfluous death—

seem to indicate that he is nearly breaking down under the burden of his guilt and its consequences; but the entry of one of the attendants of the Court, with the news of the rebellion in favour of Laertes* having actually broken out, immediately rouses him into action, and calls forth that dignity and self-possession which it is evident he knew well how to assume. Gertrude is no less ready in throwing off her dejection, and in putting on that calmnesss and courage which become a Queen.

Every one is familiar with the fine lines, in which the King rebukes Gertrude's fear for his personal safety—

> Let him go, Gertrude; do not fear our person:
> There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
> That treason can but peep to what it would,
> Acts little of his will.

One can hardly repress a smile at the idea of any divinity hedging such a remarkably valueless piece of ground (morally

* Additional Notes, No. 12.

speaking) as Claudius was; but there is no denying that if the respect he claimed was due to his office more than to himself, he acts the part of His Majesty to perfection; and no doubt, on the score of morality, he was not very far behind many of his royal prototypes in History.

From the questions, which Laertes puts, it is evident he could have received but a very confused account of his father's death, while he would seem to be entirely ignorant of his sister's madness. It is very difficult to reconcile this with the King's words in his speech—

> Her brother is in secret come from France,
> Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
> And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
> With pestilent speeches of his father's death.

Where was Laertes when these buzzers were infecting his ear? How long had he been in Denmark without coming to Elsinore? I am afraid we must leave these points in doubt, and be content with supposing that he had, for his own reasons, kept himself in concealment at some distance from Elsinore, and had not held any communication with Ophelia. It may be that on his arrival in Denmark he wrote at once to her, but that she could return no answer to his letters owing to her unhappy state of mind.

The language of Laertes is more passionate than dignified, and Claudius has certainly the advantage over him in this respect.

> O thou vile king,
> Give me my father!

is a somewhat abrupt manner of addressing one's sovereign. But Claudius meets him with such self-possession and such well-acted nobility of demeanour, that the rage of Laertes is soon reduced to less formidable and more rational dimensions. But first he has his say—

> How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with:
> To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
> Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation: to this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
> Most throughly for my father.

These be "brave words;" but I cannot join Gervinus* in his panegyric on the conduct or language of Laertes; nor can I accept such violent rant as the equivalent of daring action.

* See Authorised Translation (First Edition, vol. ii., pp. 119-20).

It seems to me that all this fine talk about giving "both the worlds to negligence," and sending "allegiance, conscience, &c., to hell," only ends in this noble-minded young man making himself the instrument of as mean an act of cowardly assassination as ever was planned by two cut-throats. It is a beautiful touch, on the part of Shakespeare, that the discussion between Laertes and Claudius should be interrupted by the entrance of Ophelia, whose pitiable condition not only serves to rekindle the fury of Laertes, but calls forth from him such expressions of anguish, and creates for him so much sympathy in the hearts of the audience, that they are prepared to look on him with so favourable an eye, as to be somewhat blind to the hideous treachery of that scheme of vengeance which he afterwards, with the assistance of Claudius, contrives.

The exclamation of Laertes when Ophelia quits the scene is, indeed, so full of simple pathos that our sympathies, chilled, if not alienated, by his bombastic language on his first entry, return to him—

> Do you see this, O God?

Nothing can be more touching than this cry of grief. Laertes is so genuinely affected by the sight of his sister's madness that his passion is moderated into a rational anger; he listens patiently enough to the King's promise to explain the circumstances of Polonius' death, and accepts his well-timed offer to submit the question of his share in it to the arbitration of Laertes' own friends. The language of Claudius is singularly judicious:

> Laertes, I must commune with your grief,
> Or you deny me right. Go but apart,
> Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
> And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me:
> If by direct or by collateral hand
> They find us touch'd, we will our kingdom give,
> Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours,
> To you in satisfaction; but if not,
> Be you content to lend your patience to us,
> And we shall jointly labour with your soul
> To give it due content.

Laertes could not but be impressed by such well-assumed generosity; his answer is just and temperate—

> Let this be so;
> His means of death, his obscure funeral,
> No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,
> No noble rite nor formal ostentation,
> Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,
> That I must call't in question.

The omission of all the proper ceremonies, and of the honours usually paid to the noble dead, evidently had much to do with the violent indignation of Laertes. His pride and the honour of his family were touched. This speech is one of the additions in "the true and perfect coppie" of 1604; in the earlier edition Laertes' speech is very different—

> You haue preuail'd my Lord, a while I'le striue,
> To bury griefe within a tombe of wrath,
> Which once vnhearsed, then the world shall heare
> Leartes had a father he held deere.

The whole scene between Claudius and Laertes has been much elaborated from the original bald sketch found in the first quarto. Shakespeare seems to have spent great care on the character of the latter; and the mention of the "obscure funerals," &c., is evidently meant to impress on our minds how much the "honour" of Laertes was of that conventional and fashionable type, which suffers more from the neglect of that ceremony demanded by etiquette than from the commission of a dishonourable action—provided it is not likely to be found out.

While Claudius is relating to Laertes the way in which Polonius met his death, the stage is occupied by a scene (Act IV., Scene 6) replacing that one in the earlier play, between Horatio and the Queen, which I have transcribed in the Appendix.* Horatio is visited by some sailors, who bring him letters from Hamlet, announcing his capture by the pirates, &c. There are two or three points to notice in this scene. Horatio says:—

> I do not know from what part of the world
> I should be greeted, if not from Lord Hamlet.

This passage seems to imply, what the rest of the play confirms, that Horatio's was a singularly lonely position. Who or what he was we can only conjecture: all we know is that he was a fellow-student of Hamlet's, but of what rank in life we are not told.† His fortune, we know from Hamlet's own words, was very small—

> For what advancement may I hope from thee,
> That no revenue hast but thy good spirits,
> To feed and clothe thee? ‡

and it would seem that he was equally poor in friends, since he knew of no one who was likely to send any letter to him

* See Appendix M.
† See Additional Note, No. 13.
‡ Act III., Scene 2, lines 52-54.

but Hamlet. This very loneliness was probably one of the causes which first drew the young prince towards Horatio.

Another point in this scene worth noticing is that the sailor who delivers the letters alludes to Hamlet as

> The ambassador that was bound for England;

which shows that Hamlet had preserved his *incognito* to all but the chiefs of the pirates, perhaps even to them; though he must have told them he was a person of great influence at Court, as they treated him well because he was "to do a good turn for them." It is not difficult to believe that Hamlet fraternised with these rough sailors just as he did with the actors, and probably enjoyed his stay among them well enough.

Horatio loses no time in setting out with the sailors to join Hamlet, whereby he would be prevented from hearing of Ophelia's death till, in company with his friend, he witnesses the "maimed rites" of her burial.

In the next scene (Act IV., Scene 7) we find that the King has completely satisfied Laertes not only that he was innocent of Polonius' death, but that he stood in great danger himself from the violence of Hamlet. What was the exact account which Claudius gave of the affair we do not know; but probably he contented himself with very much the same account as that given by the Queen (Act IV., Scene 1, lines 8-12):

> in his lawless fit,
> Behind the arras hearing something stir,
> Whips out his rapier, cries 'a rat, a rat!'
> And in this brainish apprehension kills
> The unseen good old man.

It will be remembered that then he expressed his fears for his own life.

> It had been so with us, had we been there:

but the story is incomplete in one very important point—Claudius, naturally, withholds Hamlet's reason for seeking his life from Laertes—an omission which makes him ask with much reason:

> but tell me
> Why you proceeded not against these feats,
> So crimeful and so capital in nature,
> As by your safety, wisdom, all things else,
> You mainly were stirr'd up.

The King's answer is plausible enough; his devotion to the Queen made him unwilling to punish the son whom she loved so much, and Hamlet's popularity was so great that

any public proceedings against him would have been likely to have led to a revolution. Laertes is obliged to accept this explanation; "but," he adds,

> my revenge will come.
> KING. Break not your sleeps for that; you must not think
> That we are made of stuff so flat and dull
> That we can let our beard be shook with danger
> And think it pastime. You shortly shall hear more:
> I loved your father, and we love ourself;
> And that, I hope, will teach you to imagine—

It is evident that Claudius refers to the letter he had sent, by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to England ordering the instant execution of Hamlet; indeed, he probably would have given Laertes a very broad hint as to what was the revenge he might speedily expect, had he not been interrupted by the entry of the messenger bringing letters from Hamlet himself, announcing his "sudden and more strange return." One is rather apt to overlook the dramatic nature of this situation (to use a technical term) when one finds fault with the construction of the last two acts of this play. A more complete surprise, as far as Claudius was concerned, could scarcely have been devised, or one which more thoroughly defeated all his plans.

That Claudius is thoroughly puzzled at the strange turn of events, and that, at first, he is quite at a loss what to do, his words show. He even appeals to Laertes for advice—

> Can you advise me?

and his next speech is, as it stands in the text, hopelessly obscure;* though it is clear enough that he is unable to account satisfactorily to himself for this sudden return of Hamlet, and that his mind is harassed by the possible dangers to himself that such a return suggests. Laertes, on the contrary, rejoices at the idea of meeting Hamlet—

> It warms the very sickness in my heart,
> That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,
> 'Thus didest thou.' †

He has the advantage over the King of being single-minded in his purpose; he needs no tortuous means to his end, though, ultimately, he weakly consents to use such. It would have

* See Additional Note, No. 14.

† The Quarto 1603 reads—

> That I shall liue to tell him, thus he dies,

which suggests that we might read here "Thus diest thou;" but all the other quartos and folios concur in reading "didst" and "diddest."

been well for his own honour had he adhered to the frank declaration of vengeance which he here makes, had he reproached Hamlet to his face, and openly challenged him to fight.

But to the wily mind of Claudius any straightforward revenge, such as could be obtained by a fair fight between Laertes and Hamlet, was utterly distasteful; besides, such a revenge would be at best uncertain, and might fail in the end to rid him of his hated nephew. Once embarked upon the ocean of crime, one must sail on through all the rocks and quicksands; a straight course is impossible. Already in his fertile brain and treacherous heart a scheme of cruel and underhand vengeance is being planned; his only doubt is whether this generous, and seemingly noble-minded, youth will consent to be his instrument in carrying it out. So much more tractable is Laertes now than when, but a little while since, he rudely burst in upon the royal presence at the head of a riotous mob, that he consents to be ruled by the King so long as he does not "overrule" him "to a peace." The scheme, which in so short a time has grown "ripe" in the "device" of Claudius, answers every end required—it is sure, it is safe, involving no danger or blame to those who execute it:

> But even his mother shall uncharge the practice,
> And call it accident.

Laertes gives the other his cue when he says—

> My lord, I will be ruled;
> The rather, if you could devise it so
> That I might be the organ.
>
> KING. It falls right.
> You have been talk'd of since your travel much,
> And that in Hamlet's hearing, for a quality
> Wherein, they say, you shine: your sum of parts,
> Did not together pluck such envy from him,
> As did that one, and that in my regard
> Of the unworthiest siege.

Observe the cunning with which Claudius manages his flattery; Laertes has so many good qualities, and of these the "least worthy," according to this good King's thinking, has excited Hamlet's envy; but this quality is depreciated by the artful tempter only to be extolled the next moment as

> A very riband in the cap of youth,

then, after tantalising him with some laboured and sententious phrases, he lets him know that this high report of his qualites comes from one, himself a pattern of manly skill

and courage, for [whose opinion, as Claudius probably knew, Laertes had the utmost respect, and to be praised by whom was alone enough to excite his vanity in the highest degree. At last it turns out that the quality, so especially praised by this great authority, was skill at fencing; the very art in which Hamlet and Laertes had doubtless, in their early youth, been friendly but keen rivals. The feverish anxiety of the former to meet again his old antagonist, of whose praises he is madly jealous, is dwelt upon; and then says the tempter—

> Now, out of this—
> LAER. What out of this, my lord?

He has not discovered yet to what all this is leading. Claudius having sufficiently aroused his vanity, now proceeds to kindle his anger:

> KING. Laertes, was your father dear to you?
> Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
> A face without a heart?
> LAER. Why ask you this?

The simpler nature of the youth is becoming slightly impatient at the elder's prolixity; still the latter persists in trying his patience. It is not till after another long discursion that he comes to the point:

> But, to the quick o' the ulcer:
> Hamlet comes back: what would you undertake,
> To show yourself your father's son in deed
> More than in words?

Laertes' answer is brief, but there is no mistaking its earnestness—

> To cut his throat i' the church.

The tempter's object is gained; the young man's passion, aggravated by the trial his patience has had to endure, is now at such a height that his reason, and sense of honour, will not be heard if they protest against the treacherous proposal which is now to be made to him.

The only fear, which Claudius now feels, is that his eagerness for action should betray Laertes into some hasty step; for the challenge must be made to come from Hamlet, and the other must keep close within his chamber.

This scheme of Claudius is not so elaborate as we might have expected after such a long preamble; perhaps he purposely moderates its atrocity, being not quite sure how far he might go. He is soon reassured as to any doubts he

might have felt regarding the willingness of such a pattern of chivalry, as Laertes, to stoop to any treachery; for to the tempter's comparatively simple plan of using an "unbated" foil, the tempted adds the complex villany of anointing its point with a poison so deadly that the slightest scratch from it would be fatal.

It is now the game of Claudius to check the vindictive ardour of Laertes; at the same time he feels he may go to any length in atrocity. This notable device may fail, may be detected; so to make doubly sure, if Hamlet escapes the envenomed rapier, there shall be a poisoned cup, prepared in all loving amity, for his refreshment. These two worthy characters having thus brought their plots to perfection, they are interrupted in their further communing by the entrance of the Queen, with the news of Ophelia's death—news which seems to keep Laertes from reflecting on the baseness of the crime which he has just promised to execute; fanning, at the same time, his just wrath against the man whom he supposes to be the murderer of his father, and the indirect cause of his sister's death. Claudius expresses his hypocritical fear that the rage which he had calmed may now start forth again; what he really feared was, lest this new aggravation of his suffering might not render Laertes incapable of the coolness, and patience, necessary for the success of their scheme.

I have dwelt thus at length upon this scene both because it is of the greatest importance to follow it carefully before attempting to form any judgment of the character of Laertes, and because I believe it to be one of the most carefully elaborated scenes, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, in the whole play. The bare skeleton of it in the Quarto 1603 shows us what great pains he has taken in the revision of it; and there is one important alteration which I cannot but think shows, more than anything else, what judgment Shakespeare intended us to form of Laertes. In the older version the King makes his proposal thus:

> When you are hot in midst of all your play,
> Among the foyles shall a keene rapier lie,
> Steeped in a mixture of deadly poyson,
> That if it drawes but the least dramme of blood,
> In any part of him, he cannot liue;

so that the idea of the poison does not come from Laertes, a circumstance which lessens his guilt in no little degree.

As a psychological study, I think this scene, as it now stands, one of Shakespeare's greatest efforts. The contrast between the two natures is admirable. On the one side we

have the older and hardened criminal, an adept at treachery, and incapable of denying himself the pleasure of doling out his stores of iniquity slowly, and with subtle relish of their super-excellent quality; so enamoured of hypocrisy that he must smother every word of his murderous proposal with a pile of moral platitudes; so inured to juggling with his conscience that it comes natural to him to regale the youth, whom he is inviting to a vile crime, with unctuous lectures on the heavenly nature of filial love, and of "goodness" in general. Opposed to this highly polished gem of villany, we have the passionate, violent, unreflecting youth, full of generous impulses and high courage; naturally averse to any but the directest road to whatever might be his object; ready to "cut his enemy's throat in the church" without a thought of the consequences; who would have fought by the hour, and as long as he could hold a sword, if anyone had dared to call him a coward; and yet was so devoid of any true and stable principle of courage or honour, that he could listen to a proposal to stab an unarmed man under cover of a friendly trial of skill, and could aggravate such a proposal by the addition of a subtle and deadly poison to the weapon of assassination. This contrast, so skilfully preserved in all the finest details, ceasing only when, in accordance with the great moral truth which the poet is instilling, their perfect resemblance is shown in their common want of that vigilant and incorruptible virtue which is the result of fixed and unalterable principles, and alone can preserve us from crime—such a study of character shows the hand of a master who knew human nature, not by the reading of books, but by the observation of mankind, less from laboured research than from that instinctive knowledge which is only given to the few who are born to the imperishable heritage of genius.

The character of Laertes is one of which we are tempted to form a higher opinion than, on close examination, it will be seen to deserve; because we cannot help sympathising with him under the terrible calamities which befall his father and sister. A writer, quoted in Malone's "Shakespeare," remarks very justly:—

"Laertes' character is a very odd one; it is not easy to say whether it is good or bad: but his consenting to the villanous contrivance of the usurper's to murder Hamlet makes him much more a bad man than a good one."—Ed. 1821, vol. vii., page 522.

Gervinus* seems to me to take far too favourable a view

* Burnett's Authorised Translation, First Edition, 1863, vol. ii., pages 118-120 and 123.

of this "subordinate hero's" character. I have already (in Appendix D) explained the light in which, as it appears to me, we ought to regard his conduct towards Ophelia in the earlier scenes of the play; it only remains to consider what proportion of guilt we must assign to him in this plot against Hamlet's life, to which he so readily lends his aid.

We must remember that the relations between the young prince and Laertes had been very intimate from their earliest childhood. Hamlet says in the midst of his rage—

> What is the reason that you use me thus?
> I loved you ever:
> —Act V., Scene 1, lines 277-278.

And again, when he is begging pardon of Laertes for his violent conduct—

> Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
> Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
> That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
> And hurt my brother.
> —Act V., Scene 2, lines 228-231.

But it was not only against the friend, but the prince, that Laertes consents to practise such perfidious treason. It is evident that, whatever might be the feeling of the rest of the Court, Laertes thoroughly believed Hamlet to be the heir-apparent to the throne. In warning Ophelia against setting her affections on Hamlet, he says—

> but you must fear,
> His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own;
> For he himself is subject to his birth:
> He may not, as unvalued persons do,
> Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
> The safety and health of this whole state,
> And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
> Unto the voice and yielding of that body
> Whereof he is the head. Then if he says he loves you,
> It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
> As he in his particular act and place
> May give his saying deed; which is no further
> Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal.
> —Act I., Scene 3, lines 16-28.

Such language could be used only of one who was recognised—by the speaker at least—as occupying that high position in the State, second only to the Sovereign, which belongs to a Crown Prince, to whom the duty of every loyal knight and gentleman was to render the utmost respect and honour. To assassinate Hamlet was, on the part of Laertes, an act of high treason, as well as of private treachery.

And what was the character of him against whose life he was plotting? Claudius, in proposing the crime, is forced to

pay a tribute to the noble, frank, and unsuspicious nature of his nephew:

> he, being remiss,
> Most generous and free from all contriving,
> Will not peruse the foils. [Act IV., Scene 7, lines 135-137.

Surely, had Laertes possessed one spark of true chivalry, these words would have made him pause: he would, even in the midst of his natural rage and furious desire to avenge his father's death, have exclaimed, from an irresistible impulse of honour, "No! I cannot pursue any but an open and manly vengeance against such a foe: I cannot degrade myself by stooping to artifice against one whose generous nature renders such artifice the most cowardly treachery." The real character of Hamlet must have been known to the brother of Ophelia; he must have seen enough of the young prince to feel sure, that if he went boldly to him and demanded of him an account of his conduct, he would have at least as good a chance of arriving at the truth, as he had by taking counsel with one whose only idea of vengeance was a mean and dastardly assassination.

Base enough was the plan of revenge as Claudius proposes it; but unspeakably baser was the embellishment which the ingenuity of this chivalrous young man added to it. Laertes agrees to entrap the friend of his youth, his generous rival in many an honourable contest, into a challenge at their favourite game of skill. In this game he is to have the advantage of a real weapon instead of a sham one; and, as if this were not enough, he is to call to his aid that most cowardly weapon—even of murderers—poison. Should his antagonist, by any chance, escape this twofold danger, under the pretence of a refreshing draught he is to be disposed of by another and more potent poison. In this precious scheme of manly vengeance the daring young warrior perseveres, even after his antagonist has apologised most humbly for what offence he is conscious of having committed, and has shown clearly enough that he could, if called upon, explain the unhappy death of Laertes' father;* but it never occurs to this pattern knight that he might have paused, even at that point, and in a private conference with Hamlet have learnt the truth of what, to the most inflamed mind, could not but have seemed something of a mystery. No, he goes on with his foul task, and, in spite of such scruples,† as even the

* *See* Act V., Scene 2, lines 215-231.

† *See* Act V., Scene 2, lines 282-283:—

> LAER. My lord, I'll hit him now.
> KING. I do not think 't.
> LAER. (*aside*). And yet it is almost against my conscience.

most hardened criminal must have felt, he stabs the unsuspecting Hamlet with the envenomed point. At the last, it is true, he repents; or rather, he expresses remorse; though even then he puts more of the blame than was just on Claudius. His last words are his best:—

> Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet:
> Thine and my father's death come not upon thee,
> Nor thine on me!
>
> —Act V., Scene 2, lines 316-318.

It is of this cowardly assassin that Gervinus thus writes*:—

"Laertes goes so far as to poison his sword, that in single *combat* (!) with Hamlet he may more surely obtain his end. He *sullies by this his knightly honour*, although he treats his revenge rather as a matter of honour, while for Hamlet it is a heavy matter of conscience. But in the midst of this passion, *strained even to unscrupulousness*, he is strictly confined to the one object of his revenge, whilst by Hamlet's loitering steps the guiltless Polonius falls, Ophelia becomes crazed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are made a sacrifice, and himself and his mother perish."—(Authorised Translation, 1st ed., vol. ii., pp. 119-120.)

This is but one fragment of the indirect panegyric which this great German critic pronounces on Laertes: one would certainly think that the passage was prophetic,† and intended to glorify the great man who has subdued German culture beneath his iron rule. A "combat" (according to Gervinus) is a fencing-bout between one man armed with a foil and the other with a sharp rapier! To use an "unbated" weapon in such a trial of skill, having previously anointed that weapon with a deadly poison, is merely to "sully your knightly honour!" I hope those Danes who are at present rejoicing under the amenities of the German rule will read this passage for their edification; it may perhaps reconcile them to that conscientious but slightly unscrupulous system of procedure, which they may have been tempted to characterise as callous perfidy and mean brutality.

Amazing, indeed, is the moral obliquity which can permit a great and learned man to be fascinated, by the superficial energy of such a character as Laertes, into glossing over the most detestable crimes with hearty approbation masquing under the guise of feeble censure. Gervinus wrote in 1850, and we are now in 1875; those of us who are not blinded by bigotry, or muzzled by time-serving cowardice, have been able to recognise, in the grand spectacle of an united Germany

* The italics are mine.

† Gervinus's Lectures were first published in 1850.

extinguished under a Prussian helmet, the same moral obliquity which dictated such a passage as that I have quoted. The "dreamers" have become the "men of action," and they are now as strong as any nation can be, of whose armour the chains of tyranny furnish no little part; let them rejoice while they may; let them exalt bloodshed above courage, and grasping avarice above honest industry; let them miscall the meanest and cruellest * system of religious persecution ever undertaken, even by the most ignorant barbarians, a struggle for civil liberty; let them continue, conscious of their own strength in a monstrously overgrown army, which drains the life-blood of the country, to defy treaties and violate their plighted word as a nation: now is their brief day of triumph;—but the time will come when they will awake too late to a sense of their own degradation, when they will find that, in fighting against a phantom of religious tyranny, they have flung away the safeguards of civil liberty and given themselves over, bound hand and foot, into the power of a monster of political tyranny; when, perchance, the cry of "This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" may ring through Germany with a somewhat different echo than when it could only speak, to the nation's conscience, of the dangerous similarity of their own character to the over-reflective and too scrupulous young prince, ever prone to speculation and averse to action; † when there may be no Laertes and Claudius at hand to concoct the treacherous assassination of the unwelcome intruder; and when the spectre of a national crime, which bayonets could not bury for ever, shall rise from the grave to demand, it may be to exact, a just vengeance.

The fifth act commences with the well-known scene between the two "Clowns," or "Grave-diggers." This scene has been much censured by some critics, on the ground that its broad humour is out of place in a tragic work. But here is the very excellence of Shakespeare's genius—that he does not shrink from mingling the humorous with the pathetic; in fact, he does not shrink from portraying human life as it really is.‡ He knew mankind in general as well as he knew that portion of it which forms the audience of a theatre;

* Most cruel, because the German persecution is directed against the soul, and not the body. A true Catholic would rather perish at the stake than live, as he is compelled to live in most parts of the German Empire, without the Sacraments.

† See Gervinus's eloquent parallel between Hamlet and the German nation.—(Authorised Translation, 1st edition, vol. ii., pp. 145-149.)

‡ See above, Part II., page 41.

he knew that if his plays were to attract spectators they must be varied, and not monotonous: we may admire such tragedies as Voltaire's in the closet, but on the stage they crush us under their massive weight of lugubriousness. But this system of brightening up tragedy, by an infusion of the comic element, is contrary to all canons of foreign criticism. Any one who has seen "Hamlet" played on the Italian stage will have observed the preternatural gravity of Polonius, for instance, and generally how careful all the actors were, including even Hamlet himself, to divest the play as much as possible of any taint of humour. In this very scene we are now considering, when I saw it played at Naples, there was only one grave-digger (he was necessary for Hamlet), and he sang quite a pretty little song in place of the humorous ballad of which "The First Clown" in Shakespeare gives us such an odd version.

Who that has seen the tragedy of Hamlet represented, whether well or ill, has not felt that this scene comes as a welcome relief, just at that point when the strain which has been put upon our sadder and more pathetic feelings has been greater than we well could bear. The madness and death of Ophelia, the revolting treachery of Claudius, the miserable weakness of Laertes, have plunged us into a state of mind which is likely to render us impatient of anything but the briefest termination of the story, unless it be relieved by some gleam of cheerfulness. We are invited by the author to assist at the making of the grave which is to receive the pure body of Ophelia: an ordinary dramatist would treat us to nothing more refreshing than a series of dreary and solemn platitudes on death; but Shakespeare extorts from us involuntary smiles at the humours of two simple clowns, who are portrayed, not as unnatural vehicles of dismal sentiments, but as natural sources of genuine amusement. They go to their work with just as much sense of its solemn import as such men would, in real life, feel; they bandy grim jests, and the one who, by virtue of being less ignorant than his assistant, is able to assume all the superiority of learning, tickles our sense of humour by his absurd and unconscious blunders no less than by his placid self-conceit. This Clown belongs to the same class of characters as Bottom and Dogberry; men who, having picked up some scraps of learning and long words, of which they know neither the proper use nor meaning, so thoroughly believe in their own intellectual superiority over their fellows that we cannot help laughing with them, rather than at them, for their ridiculous

vanity. The whole essence of the humour in these characters lies in their utter unconsciousness of their own errors; immediately the actor tries to emphasise their absurd mistakes, as if he knew he was saying something amusing, all that humour vanishes. I have myself met with such characters, in real life, more than once, and I have been immensely impressed by the perfect self-complacency with which they gave forth their grandiloquent mispronunciations.*

With regard to this scene, there seems to be little doubt that Shakespeare had in his mind the case of Sir James Hales,† of which he could only "have heard in conversation," as Malone points out; this is but another instance of the observant nature of our great dramatist; his ears as well as his eyes were always open.

When Hamlet enters with Horatio we find him more than ever disposed to avail himself of any temporary distraction which may offer itself. How the two friends contrive to find themselves in the churchyard at this opportune moment we must not inquire too closely. This is, surely, one of those cases in which the dramatist may be allowed some licence in the arrangement of his incidents. It is more important to observe that the character of Hamlet is here most admirably sustained, and that as he approaches, unconsciously, nearer to the fulfilment of his long delayed task, he becomes more prone to reflect and moralise on every circumstance which comes under his notice. He is wandering about in a purposeless manner, while his work of vengeance remains undone, while the solemn command of the Ghost, and the promptings of just self-defence, alike remain neglected, while the maiden that he loved so devotedly is lying on her bier—he does not know of her sad fate, it is true; Horatio, who had seen her in her pitiful distraction, but who was ignorant of her death, had, perhaps, scrupled to tell him the painful news;—still, it would have been only natural that he should have made all the haste he could to gain some tidings

* I may, perhaps, be excused for mentioning one instance of the many which have fallen under my personal observation. It was at the Zoological Gardens, on a certain Whit-Monday, when the heat was excessive, that I happened to be taking my lunch at a table next to a worthy middle-aged couple, whose faces bore witness to the exertions they had made in the pursuit of zoological knowledge. "Mary, my dear," remarked the gentleman, "it's awful 'ot." "'Ot, James!" answered the lady, while fanning herself with a newspaper; "I'm perfectly *prostituted* with the 'eat." I never shall forget the expression of placid self-satisfaction which overspread her ample countenance as she gave utterance to this unhappy sentence. I was prostrated with suppressed laughter, if not with the heat.

† *See* Notes in Malone's Shakespeare (edition 1821), vol. vii., page 463.

of his beloved; yet he lingers in this churchyard, and is lost in wonder because the vulgar sexton can find heart to sing while he is digging a grave. It is evident that Hamlet is now in that condition into which sensitive natures, when oppressed by calamity, are very apt to sink—he is in a state of mental disturbance which in its very anxiety to escape from the subject which most weighs upon the mind is apt to confound itself, as far as unthinking observers are concerned, with heartless apathy. Alas! how little they know the terrible oppression which, in such unhappy men, wraps the heart round, like a leaden shroud; it is to this Hamlet afterwards alludes when he says to Horatio—

> **But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart:**
> **—Act V., Sc. 2, line 119.**

All the time that he is moralising on the skulls which the unfeeling grave-digger "jowls on the ground;" while politician, courtier, lawyer, fine lady, jester, all in turn are the subjects of his cynical sermons; while he bandies jests with the rude but ready sexton; not for one moment is he able to escape from the cloud that hangs over him: he may smile at the pragmatical impertinence of the "absolute knave" who answers his questions with so little respect, but the heavy weight at his heart grows none the lighter. There is something infinitely more tragic in these vain attempts to escape, though by means of the most trivial distractions, from the oppressive shadow of the rapidly approaching catastrophe, than in all the grand sonorous groanings of heroic tragedy.

There are one or two points worth remarking in this scene: one is that the grave-digger, although he had been so long employed near Elsinore, evidently does not recognise Hamlet; we may conclude that his cloak would partially conceal him, and that as he would probably be in the same dress as that which he wore when taken by the pirates, his appearance would not show many signs of his princely rank. Another point is that from the words which this "clown" uses in speaking of Hamlet—

> **He that is mad and sent into England—**

it would seem that the common people knew nothing more of the reason why he had been sent out of Denmark but that it was on account of his madness.

Another point, which I should have thought would have attracted the attention, at least of the more modern commentators, is that we have here the same joke about the madness of all Englishmen, which has so long been a cardinal

point of most foreigners' creeds with regard to us, and which the eccentricity of some of our fellow-countrymen, when travelling, has helped to confirm. It would be curious to know whether the same opinion of us prevailed generally in Shakespeare's time, and what was the origin of it.*

The remaining point of importance in this scene is the allusion to Hamlet's age, from which it appears, according to the grave-digger, that he was born on the very day his father defeated Fortinbras (lines 139, 140); that also on that day this rustic wit "came to" the trade of grave-maker (lines 135, 136); finally, that he had "been sexton, man and boy, thirty years" (lines 152, 153). This would seem to put it beyond doubt that Hamlet was thirty years old. Besides this evidence we have the corroborative circumstance that Yorick's skull had lain in the earth three-and-twenty years (line 163). As Hamlet tells Horatio that he knew Yorick, who had borne him "on his back a thousand times," and whose lips he had kissed "he knew not how oft" (lines 173-176), in fact, that Yorick had been the constant companion of his early childhood, the age of Hamlet could not have been possibly much less than thirty years. I have thought it better to discuss in the Appendix† the question how much we ought to rely upon the figures in the passages referred to above.

Hamlet's moralisings are interrupted by the entrance of a funeral procession, in which are the King, Queen, and the courtiers. Here is another distraction to occupy his restless mind. It seems to me hard to conceive a more dramatic "situation," or a more pathetic incident than this: he has no idea whose the funeral is; even Laertes' presence does not suggest to him that it may be Ophelia's body which they follow "with such maimed rites." As I have pointed out before, Horatio could not have known of Ophelia's death any more than Hamlet; but he had seen her in her pitiable, distracted state, and it would certainly seem that, if he had spoken of her at all to Hamlet, he had concealed the gravity of her affliction; otherwise the latter would surely have suspected that the funeral was hers. How deep a pathos there is in the perfect unconsciousness of Hamlet that every detail of this sad ceremony at which he was looking as an uninterested spectator, touched so nearly the tenderest feelings of his heart—

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* See Additional Note, No. 15.
† See Appendix P.

> This doth betoken
> The corse they follow did with desperate hand
> Fordo its own life : 'twas of some estate.
> Couch we awhile, and mark.
>
> —Lines 208—210.

The way in which he mentions Laertes has, to the audience who know what has happened, something in it of satire which the speaker never intended—

> That is Laertes—a very noble youth.

It seems to me that at this point the actor generally loses an opportunity for the display of facial acting of the highest order. Hamlet and Horatio have retired out of sight of those who are taking part in the funeral ceremony, but not out of sight of the audience. Some actors I have seen cover their face with their cloaks, while others almost go off the stage; but surely Hamlet, immediately he hears the words, "Her obsequies," &c., in answer to the demand of Laertes—

> What ceremony else ?

would begin to listen with the closest attention; the fact that it was a woman's funeral would strike him. A little further, when he hears the words—

> Yet here she is allow 'd her maiden crants,
> Her maiden strewments, &c.,

suspicion of the terrible truth would begin to dawn on him; his eyes would glance rapidly from face to face with a piercing look, his grasp of Horatio's hand would tighten, his breathing become quicker and quicker, till at Laertes' words—

> A ministering angel shall my sister be,

the dreadful certainty would burst upon him—it *was* his love's half-honoured grave that lay open there before him, it was her sweet body on which that sad rain of flowers was falling; with a sob, half-suppressed, he would throw himself on Horatio's breast, as the words come from him in a low moan of despair—

> What, the fair Ophelia !

the name he seemed to have loved best to call her. Perhaps these few words were the first full confession of his love he had ever made to this true and single-hearted friend; for even to him he never seems to have told the secret of this love, which, under the cruel repression that he exercised over it, was silently eating away his heart. It is but for a moment that he suffers himself to be overcome; the sound of Laertes' voice, invoking curses on the head of him, "whose wicked

deed" had deprived the sweet maid of her "ingenious sense," rouses him; and as he sees the brother, half-mad with passion, leap into the grave; as he listens to that bombastic display of grief—

> Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
> Till of this flat a mountain you have made
> To o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
> Of blue Olympus.

—when Hamlet sees and hears all this; he who loved this fair and sweet maiden with a love which was all the fiercer because it had to be crushed; he who had sacrificed this love and its object on the altar of a great purpose which was not, for all that cruel sacrifice, a whit nearer fulfilment; he who had torn the tender strings of his own heart, had broken hers, and shook her reason from its throne, and had done all this in vain;—what wonder is it that his soul is filled with bitterness, that the sight and sound of this brother's outrageous grief maddens him, and that he too leaps into the grave with the cry—

> This is I,
> Hamlet the Dane.

In these few words Hamlet would seem to say: "This is I whom you execrate as the wretch who has killed your father and driven your sister into madness. I confess I did this, but I did it unwittingly. Revile me, curse me, use me as you will. I can bear anything but the mockery of your pretending that your grief is greater than mine." Surely in this case the circumstances would excuse in any man, even in one who, unlike Hamlet, was, by habit and nature, endowed with the utmost self-command, an outburst of furious passion. The torture of self-suppression had become greater than human nature could bear. In vain had he tried to burn all tenderness out of his heart, to force himself into a deed of just vengeance; through his weakness he had failed; failed utterly to strike one blow against the guilty murderer, while by the irony of fate two innocent lives, one that of her whom he loved best on earth, had been sacrificed through his unwilling agency. Brought, as it seemed, by the cruel caprice of the same relentless fate, without any warning, to the grave of his love, when it was too late to speak one tender word to her, or to beg her forgiveness for his harshness, he hears her brother, who he knew never loved her with the same tenderness that he did, calling down "full ten times treble woe" on his head—as if there could be greater woe than what he was enduring then—and demanding to be

buried with Ophelia, as if there were no one else in the world who would die for her! Why, Hamlet must have felt that he would gladly die, ten thousand times, the most agonising death, if he could only call her back to life.

The malignant way in which Steevens has misrepresented Hamlet's conduct in this scene is pretty well known, chiefly from the indignant remonstrances it has called forth. But it may be as well to give the passage here :—

"He interrupts the funeral designed in honour of this lady (Ophelia), at which both the King and Queen were present; and by such an outrage to decency, renders it still more necessary for the usurper to lay a second stratagem for his life, though the first had proved abortive. He insults the brother of the dead, and boasts of an affection for his sister, which before he had denied to her face, and yet at this very time must be considered as desirous of supporting the character of a madman, so that the openness of his confession is not to be imputed to him as a virtue."

Poor Hamlet! Had you been standing in the Old Bailey dock, and George Steevens counsel for the prosecution, you would have scarce escaped hanging! For good taste and veracity this venomous indictment reminds one of the Old Bailey in its worst days. It was, perhaps, well for Mr. Steevens that no usurper was at hand to punish outrages to decency, on the part of critics, in his day with the same sternness which Claudius found necessary in Hamlet's case. Seriously speaking, it is hard to believe that the man who wrote the above criticism had ever read Shakespeare's "Hamlet." One would think it referred to the conduct of some misguided young man who had rudely interrupted the funeral "designed in honour" of some distinguished person in Westminster Abbey. The whole circumstances of the case, the character, situation, and calamities of Hamlet—in fact, all that has happened, or has been told us, in the former part of the play, is ignored. It is sufficient to observe here that when Hamlet told Ophelia "he loved her not," he was speaking in the character of a madman; while, in this case, it is real passion which completely overcomes his self-control.

Maddened as Hamlet is by the sight of Laertes' grief, he still retains sufficient command of himself to remonstrate with him. Immediately on his leaping into the grave, Laertes seizes him by the throat, exclaiming—

The devil take thy soul!

Hamlet forbears, at first, to repel violence with violence. There is dignity as well as self-command in his answer—

HAM. Thou pray'st not well.
I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenetive and rash,
Yet have I in me something dangerous,
Which let thy wisdom fear. Hold off thy hand.

He does not forget that Laertes is, after all, her brother; he does not at first struggle with him; he begs him to take his hand off him; for though he is not prone to violence, he has "something dangerous" in him now. It would seem that Laertes, forgetting all but his hatred of Hamlet, would then and there have taken his revenge. The latter is driven to defend himself, and some of the courtiers are obliged to part the two. Hamlet's blood is now up, and he flings away all concealment:

HAM. Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
Until my eyelids will no longer wag.
QUEEN. O my son, what theme?
HAM. I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

It is impossible for me to describe the effect which that cry of agony, "I loved Ophelia," has upon me. I never heard it yet spoken on the stage with one-thousandth part of the force that rightly belongs to it. Is it not the key to much of the mystery which Hamlet has been to all around him, and, in some degree, even to himself? It is the cry of a love which has been cruelly beaten down, which has been kept, as it were, chained and gagged in the farthest corner of his sorrow-darkened heart; it has never ceased to struggle against its fetters; and now at last, in the anguish of death, its bonds are burst and its voice can be stifled no longer. Whatever the consequences, in the presence even of his uncle, before whom he would have shrunk from showing any glimpse of his real feelings, Hamlet is obliged to lay bare his heart's wounds. Precisely in proportion to the sincerity and depth of his love for Ophelia has been the difficulty which he experienced in fulfilling a task involving the abandonment of that love. Much of his bitterness to her and others is now explained; for he was trying to kill an affection which would not die.

It is remarkable that in his fury Hamlet makes action the test of sincerity:

What wilt thou do for her?

And again:

HAM. 'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do:
Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself

> Woo't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?
> I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?
> Be buried quick with her, and so will I:
> And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
> Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
> Singeing his pate against the burning zone
> Make Ossa like a wart! Nay an thou'lt mouth,
> I'll rant as well as thou.

It is evident that Hamlet speaks these words with the utmost vehemence; he is in that state of excitement in which such temperaments as his crave the outlet of action; *at this moment* he would do any of the things that he mentions. Whether, finding himself carried away by his rage into a declaration of his love for Ophelia, he has sufficient presence of mind to exaggerate his language wilfully, in order that he may lessen the importance of such a confession, may be a matter for conjecture. I believe myself that this outburst is one of those uncontrollable paroxysms of excitement which persons who, like Hamlet, are on the verge of madness, must occasionally suffer if they are to preserve their reason at all. It is possible that Hamlet's fury was aggravated by the recollection that he, like Laertes, was prone to threaten much and to perform comparatively little. For Laertes is by no means the man of action that he at first sight appears to be. The catastrophe which overtook Ophelia might have been prevented, had he, instead of discussing schemes of vengeance with Claudius, have followed his sister out, when he saw her unhappy condition, and not have left her till he had placed her in some trustworthy hands. It was in more than one respect that Hamlet might have seen in the circumstances of Laertes some reflection of his own; for in both of them strong feeling and enthusiasm were wrongly directed.

The Queen's description of Hamlet's mental condition is very beautiful, and no doubt it is also true; in fact, this is one of the speeches which, like that in which she describes her son's grief over the body of Polonius,* is intended to admit us behind the scenes, and to reveal to us those phases of Hamlet's character which could not be exhibited on the stage:

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* See Act IV., Scene 1, lines 23–27.

> KING. * * * * * * Where is he gone?
> QUEEN. To draw apart the body he hath kill'd:
> O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
> Among a mineral of metals base,
> Shows itself pure; he weeps for what is done.

> This is mere madness :
> And thus awhile the fit will work on him ;
> Anon, as patient as the female dove
> When that her golden couplets are disclosed,*
> His silence will sit drooping.

Hamlet almost justifies this description by the sudden change in his tone from passionate invective to gentle expostulation—

> Hear you, sir ;
> What is the reason that you use me thus ?
> I loved you ever.

Had he been able to restrain himself and to argue calmly with Laertes, he might well have asked him why he execrated the friend of his youth for an act which was committed unintentionally, and which had been bitterly repented, without giving that friend any chance of explaining his conduct. It seems as if Hamlet now felt the effects of reaction after his vehement outburst of rage, and was inclined to yield to that spirit of fatalism which every now and then got possession of him. This is the only explanation which I can see of the somewhat enigmatical words with which he concludes this speech—

> but it is no matter ;
> Let Hercules himself do what he may,
> The cat will mew, and dog will have his day. [*Exit.*

The commentators have not exerted their ingenuity on this passage, which is rather unintelligible : the meaning would seem to be, "Not even the strength of Hercules can change the disposition which Nature implants in us ; it is not in your nature to understand my motives ; and do whatever I will, you will persist in misunderstanding them."

Hamlet goes away in such a state of agitation that he forgets the presence of Horatio, whom the King wisely bids to wait on him. The last three lines which Claudius speaks are addressed to Laertes, and the speech should thus be marked :

> (*To Laertes*). Strengthen your patience in our last night's† speech ;
> We'll put the matter to the present push.

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* This is a curious instance of Shakespeare's accuracy in those illustrative details which he is so fond of introducing. The dove lays only two eggs, and when the young are first hatched they are covered with a yellow down, which affords so slight a protection from the cold that the mother is obliged to sit on them for three days. (See Steevens' and Heath's Notes, Malone's "Shakespeare," edition 1821, vol. vii., p. 482.)

† This would seem to imply that the conversation between the King and Laertes in the last act took place on the previous night. But this could not have been so, as will be seen by reference to that scene (Act IV., Scene 7) ; neither is it possible that Ophelia could have died at night or in the

(*To the* QUEEN). Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son.
(*To* LAERTES). This grave shall have a living monument:
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;
Till then, in patience our proceedings be.

By "a living monument" Claudius means that a living man shall be sacrificed to the memory of the dead. Laertes could not but be confirmed in his purpose by what had passed; everything is most ingeniously contrived by Shakespeare to fan the flame of his resentment against Hamlet.

I have already* treated of the first part of this next scene (Act V., Scene 2), when discussing the question of Hamlet's conduct to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It only remains to notice the words in which he expresses to Horatio his sorrow for his outburst of passion over the grave of Ophelia. Not that he alludes to Ophelia in any way either directly or indirectly; he carefully avoids doing so, which confirms what I have suggested as regards his reticence, even to Horatio, on the subject of his love.

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For, by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his; I'll court his favours:
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion.

Nothing can be more becoming than the tone of this speech; he is the more sorry for his display of passion, because, now that he is calm, he can understand, from his own feelings with regard to his father, what those of Laertes must have been: but it was the "bravery" or "ostentation" of the latter's grief which enraged him. Hamlet is very probably going to say something more, when they are interrupted by the entrance of Osric.

The next scene is one of the most charming pieces of high comedy which Shakespeare has left us; and those are very superficial critics who talk of the slovenliness of the last act, for the elaborate finish of this scene, at least, cannot be denied. It barely exists in the first version of 1603. Shakespeare was too great an artist not to know that any interruption to the action at this point would not be tolerated, unless it were of so interesting a nature as to reconcile the audience to the delay. Some pause is necessary before the scheme of

evening and have been buried the next day. The 2nd Clown says (Act V., Scene 1, line 4) "that the crowner hath sat on her;" and though this may be an anachronism, it is probable there would have been some inquiry into her death.

* *See* Part III., pp. 64-67.

the King and Laertes can be carried out. Nowhere is the irony, which pervades this great work, more remarkable than in the contrivance of introducing what the spectators know is a treacherous design to assassinate Hamlet with a genuinely comic prelude. Affectation was never more happily ridiculed than it is in this mincing periphrastic courtier; nor was satire ever more effective and good-humoured than is that of Hamlet, whose wit shines now with greater brilliancy than ever, though he is heavy at heart and is standing unconsciously on the brink of his own grave.

There are two passages in this scene which have occasioned much difference of opinion on the part of the critics; one is that in which Osric gives the details of the wager that the King had made on the contest between Laertes and Hamlet; the other is that in which Hamlet describes the character of Osric to Horatio, after that elegant gentleman has taken his leave of them. The comments that I have ventured to make on these passages will be found in the Additional Notes.*

Osric has left them but a very short time when "a Lord" enters with a message from the King, who sends to know if it be Hamlet's pleasure to play with Laertes at once, or if he prefers to wait. The first sentence of Hamlet's answer sounds oddly in his mouth:

HAM. I am constant to my purposes; they follow the King's pleasure: if his fitness speaks, mine is ready; now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now.

How different the tone of this answer to that in which he replied to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they were acting as the King's ambassadors (Act IV., Scene 2, lines 24-30). Hamlet seems anxious to atone for his outbreak of temper at Ophelia's grave in every way; and it is as much from this motive, as from the spirit of emulation which was strong in him, that he accepts Laertes' challenge. All his answers are courteous, and even submissive:

LORD. The king and queen and all are coming down.
HAM. In happy time.
LORD. The queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play.
HAM. She well instructs me. [*Exit Lord.*

There is no bitterness, no affectation of madness; no rebellion against his mother's authority. He is confident of winning the wager; yet about his heart "all is ill." Horatio tries to persuade him to abandon the match, even at the last

* *See* Additional Note No. 16.

moment, but he will not listen to his suggestions; the very misgivings that he feels only serve to strengthen his resolution; a strange fitful obstinacy, not uncommon in those whose indecision is the result of over-much reflection. Such persons seem often to find a kind of relief in acting on sudden impulses, or in spite of strong forebodings. Hamlet's last speech to Horatio points to the fact that his fatalism has been growing upon him until it has entirely usurped the place of any other faith. True that it is not a pagan fatalism, but neither is it the resignation of a Christian, in spite of the allusion to the New Testament. It is at best the negative courage of a conscientious doubter, who knows that death must come, but is content to leave the hereafter in uncertainty:

> we defy augury: there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all; since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

On the stage a change of scene now occurs, but it appears that originally there was none, the conversation with Horatio and Osric taking place in the same hall in which the fencing match occurs. The King, Queen, Laertes, and Court enter, the flagons of wine are set on the table, and the first part of the treacherous plot against Hamlet's life commences with the placing of Laertes' hand in Hamlet's by his pious Majesty King Claudius. What must be the feelings of Laertes at this moment, as he suffers himself to go through this monstrous hypocrisy? He has need of a courage such as few murderers have ever shown, if he is not to tremble as he takes, in solemn reconciliation, the hand of the man whom he is about to assassinate in the most perfidious manner.

I transcribe the whole of Hamlet's speech here, as it has been made the grounds for an attack on his good faith and truthfulness by Johnson, whose note on the passage is—

> I wish Hamlet had made some other defence; it is unsuitable to the character of a good or a brave man, to shelter himself in falsehood.
> —Malone's "Shakespeare" (edit. 1821), vol. vii., p. 505.

Of course, Steevens greedily seizes on this accusation, and adds it to his long list of charges against Hamlet; but I believe it to be utterly unjust, and founded on a total misconception of this particular passage, and of Hamlet's character. Let us see what it is that Hamlet says, and under what circumstances he says it:—

> Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;
> But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.

This presence knows,
And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd
With sore distraction. What I have done,
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness: if't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother.

Now this apology, and I maintain that it is a most generous and frank apology, has to be made in the presence of Claudius, and of the courtiers before whom Hamlet had, for his own purposes, assumed madness. He could not have ignored this assumption; he could not have said—"The King and Queen and all about the court have thought me mad, but I am not mad at all; I have been only pretending to be so; I killed your father by mistake," &c. &c., entering, in fact, into a long explanation of that which it was imperatively necessary he should keep concealed. The madness which he alleges, as his excuse, before Claudius and the others is the madness which he had assumed; but there was another madness, the "sore distraction" into which the tragic calamities that had darkened his young life had driven him, the terrible anguish of mind which he felt on hearing with such awful suddenness of his beloved Ophelia's death. It was not untruthful of him to say that he had killed Polonius, and had raved against Laertes by the side of his sister's grave, when in such a state of mental agitation as might well be held to excuse him from any guilty intention. I do not see how Hamlet could possibly make a more open confession, under the circumstances, than he does in the last four lines. It was such a confession as might have induced Laertes to question him further when alone; but it was not a deliberate piece of falsehood, nor was it so wanting in thoroughness and magnanimity but it should have forced the most relentless spirit, however greatly wronged, to pause in its work of vengeance.

The answer of Laertes is a perfect marvel of hypocrisy; one can hardly comprehend how any man could speak such words to a friend whom he was about to murder:

LAER. I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive, in this case, should stir me most

To my revenge: but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof, and will no reconcilement,
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace,
To keep my name ungored. But till that time
I do receive your offer'd love like love
And will not wrong it.

HAM. I embrace it freely,
And will this brother's wager frankly play.

It would really seem from the second sentence of this speech that Laertes had forgotten the double treachery which he and Claudius had planned; for it was, humanly speaking, impossible that Hamlet could escape with his life, and yet Laertes talks seriously here of appealing to a court of honour. It was hardly worth his while to invent such a piece of wanton duplicity; and I cannot help thinking that this is either an oversight of the poet's, or that he means us to understand that Laertes had in his rage consented to this treachery, but that in his inmost mind he never had realised its execution. This speech, if *intentionally* untrue, shows a depth of falsehood almost incredible in one so young as Laertes; it is just what, had his better nature prevailed, we should have expected him to say to Hamlet, and I believe that we must suppose him to have forgotten, at the time he spoke it, how base a part he was about to play.

Hamlet is full of gracious courtesy and elegant compliment, as if endeavouring to efface from the minds of all who had witnessed it his violent behaviour in the churchyard. Even for Claudius he has a gentle and polite answer:

HAM. Very well, my lord;
Your grace has laid the odds* o' the weaker side.

There is a wonderful skill and power in the tragic touches of this last scene which we, who know what is going to happen, are apt to overlook. What can be more pathetic than to see this noble-hearted, generous, youth falling with such unsuspicious readiness into the treacherous plot, and by his very fairness and courtesy making the guilt of his murderers appear so much greater? As unconsciously he goes to his death all that is most amiable in his nature seems to put forth itself: the grating irony, the savage vindictiveness of language, the bitter contempt for the inferior natures

* This expression has given rise to much needless comment and ingenious explanation. All that Hamlet means is that the King has "backed" the weaker side in "backing" him. In betting language Hamlet should have said "taken the odds." The King sets the matter right in his answer, telling Hamlet that, because Laertes had improved so much, therefore he (the King) had got odds instead of an even bet.

around him, have all disappeared in the Hamlet we have now before us; and as we contrast him with the Hamlet of the grave scene, we are forcibly reminded of the Queen's beautiful description already quoted.*

Laertes would really seem to deserve the playful reproach of Hamlet—

> you but dally;
> I pray you, pass with your best violence;
> I am afeard you make a wanton of me—

for he scruples, now it is in his hand, to use the treacherous weapon. It may be, if he had not committed himself so deeply with Claudius, in whose presence he felt an ignoble shame at the idea of seeming to flinch from his deadly purpose, Laertes' better feelings might even now have prevailed. But it is too late: he rouses himself to action, attacks his antagonist with the utmost vigour, meeting with a more obstinate and skilful defence than he had anticipated. At last he breaks down Hamlet's guard and wounds him; both had already become somewhat heated in the struggle, and the slight pain which Hamlet would feel, though he does not notice it, would serve to aggravate his excitement: their play becomes wild, and in the scuffle Hamlet changes foils with Laertes† and wounds him in turn. So completely absorbed is he in this trial of skill that he seems to have forgotten for the moment everything else, and does not even feel the wound, or see the blood to which Horatio draws attention. But he is soon brought back to a horrible consciousness of his tragic surroundings, no less than of his own fate. His mother falls on the ground in agony: Hamlet's first anxiety is for her; he does not even answer Horatio's inquiry as to himself. The Titanic hypocrisy of Claudius does not even now fail him; he cannot resist the temptation to lie, however useless it may be:

> KING. She swounds to see them bleed.

Perhaps he thought Gertrude's love would even now be stronger than aught else, and that she would with her dying breath seek to conceal his infamy. But he is mistaken:

> QUEEN. No, no, the drink, the drink,—O my dear Hamlet,—
> The drink, the drink! I am poison'd.

It is fit that the first denunciation of his treachery, which was his death-warrant, should come from her who was at once the cause, and the victim, of his heaviest crime.

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* *See* Act V., Scene 1 (lines 272-275).
† *See* Additional Notes, No. 17.

Laertes makes all the atonement now in his power, and it is remarkable that against him Hamlet neither expresses, nor feels, any resentment. In the few moments that are left to him of life he is all action; the excitement sustains his strength, even under the deadly effects of the poison, sufficiently to enable him to stab the King, and, heedless of the cry of "treason"* and the appeal for help which the wounded wretch makes, to pour the poison, "temper'd by himself," down the murderer's throat. The entreaty of Laertes—

> Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet:
> Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
> Nor thine on me!

is frankly and generously answered. It may be observed that Laertes makes no allusion to Ophelia, and that Hamlet does not stop to consider the difference in degree of their respective guilt before he exchanges forgiveness with his assassin. Though life is fast ebbing away, he yet has strength to snatch the poisoned cup from Horatio, who could not bear the idea of being parted from his friend even in death, and to charge him with the solemn duty of vindicating his good name; the well-known lines in which with touching anxiety he makes this last request are so beautiful that I cannot refrain from quoting them:—

> O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

The approach of the victorious Fortinbras, the sight of whose energetic action had so keenly rebuked Hamlet's indolent procrastination, and the arrival of the ambassadors from England with the news of the success of his deadly stratagem against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, add to the dramatic force of this closing scene.

Almost the last syllables he can utter are devoted to practical ends: there is no moralising now; anxious as he is to hear the fate of those false friends on whom he had taken so terrible a revenge, he leaves the subject to urge with his dying voice the claim of Fortinbras to the crown that should

* The courtiers seem inclined to defend the King; but they are paralysed with horror at the rapidly succeeding tragedies which are being enacted around them, and cowed by the resistless impetuosity of Hamlet. That Claudius should be slain before the eyes of those whose servility he had done so much to gain, and not a hand be raised in his defence, is a just retribution.

have been his own. Death overmasters him before he can complete his directions to Horatio, and he expires with the strange and pithy dogma in which his doubting creed is summed up—

The rest is silence.

Neither hope, nor despair, as to the future, possesses his departing soul: his religion is a resigned uncertainty—better than a fretful doubt, but infinitely below the sweet hope, and humble trust, of a true Christian.

With the death of Hamlet the play virtually ends. Horatio's farewell—

Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

recalls Hamlet's own words, "to die, to sleep." The entry of Fortinbras and the ambassadors is necessary merely to complete the story. We may, perhaps, regret that Shakespeare never felt impelled to write the speech of Horatio over the bodies of Hamlet and the others. Had he done so, it would have formed a splendid parallel to that of Antony over the body of Cæsar.

"The rest is silence." These are the very words that rise to our lips as we look back upon the mighty work which we have thus followed, step by step, from its solemn beginning to its tragical end. Through what scenes of infinite variety have we travelled; what marvellous insight into human nature have we attained! Admiration may well be dumb, for such creative power as that which called these characters into existence seems to us almost more than human. The mind may well ponder in silence on the great problems which the history of Hamlet presents; the soul may well lie hushed in awe as she contemplates those mysteries which have wrung this noble heart with such agony of incertitude. The contest between doubt and faith is finished; and in the boundless ocean of eternity this storm-tossed spirit, let us trust, has found rest and peace at last.

We have traced his faltering steps from the day when the eager energy, and hungry love, of his youth were paralysed and blighted by the crime which robbed one parent of life, and the other of that sacred right to love and honour, without which a mother's name is to her son but a terrible inheritance of infamy. We have seen him, while scarcely able to sustain the burden of this great sorrow, yet laden in addition with a charge of vengeance, which he gladly embraces as a sacred duty, but perpetually scruples to fulfil. In spite of his constant hesitation, of his overstrained conscientious-

ness, of his fitful and fruitless energy, of his misplaced tenderness and his equally misplaced bitterness—in spite of the painful contrast between the vigour of his words and the feebleness of his actions, we have seen so much that is noble, and generous, and grand in his character, that, in spite of all his weakness, we honour him as much as we love him. When we analyse this feeling, we find that our admiration for Hamlet is chiefly excited by the strong love of virtue and hatred of vice which never fail to distinguish him, and from the excess of which his very worst faults arise. Nor is his standard of right and wrong based on that comfortable compromise with Heaven, which is the foundation of the world's morality. Every character in the play, with the exception of Horatio and Ophelia, represents some type of such morality, from the plausible murderer, Claudius, to the harmless but ridiculous "waterfly," Osric. With all these Hamlet is in a state of antagonism. It matters nothing that we ourselves may not have the courage to do anything but swim with the stream, and bow our heads gracefully before the wind of popular opinion; our own pliability in no way interferes with the admiration that we feel for the uncompromising scorn with which Hamlet ridicules, exposes, and denounces, the falseness and baseness of those around him.

What, then, is the chief moral defect of Hamlet's character? "*L'Amleto c'è il dubbio,*" says Signor Salvini,* in his musical voice, and with that charming manner which almost carries conviction with it. "Doubt" or "hesitation" is certainly one main characteristic of Hamlet's nature, and it may arise, in great part, from his over-reflective habit of mind. But the "diagnosis," so to speak, of this mental disease of "hesitation" it is difficult to determine. It seems to me that the principal flaw in Hamlet's character is the want of humility, and consequently of faith. I do not mean that humility which is the brightest jewel in the martyr's crown, that patient and cheerful submission to every provocation, that glorious self-abasement which our Saviour first taught and practised; but rather that humility which is the backbone of enthusiasm, which consists of a complete subordination of one's own prejudices and desires and will to some great pur-

* In a conversation which I had the privilege of enjoying with the great Italian actor, he drew an eloquent comparison between Hamlet and Orestes, whose circumstances present so much similarity, while their characters form so great a contrast. It would be interesting to know if reading the story of Orestes suggested to Shakespeare the creation of Hamlet's character. Horatio, the "Pylades" of Hamlet, has no parallel in the old history of Saxo Grammaticus.

pose, and of a belief, so thorough and unquestioning in the justice of that purpose, as to render any hesitation, in one's efforts to accomplish it, impossible. Had Hamlet possessed this humility he would never have doubted for one moment that the Ghost's charge of vengeance was to be fulfilled at any cost; he would never have thought of the consequences to his body or to his soul; but would have openly slain Claudius, and would have stood before the people with the blood fresh on his hands, indifferent as to their judgment and fearless of their punishment. Such humility does not always lend itself to the accomplishment of great or good ends; the fanatic shares it with the enthusiast, the assassin with the liberator.

The want of faith in Hamlet's character is very remarkable. It is true he believes the Ghost at first, the more readily because its revelation confirms his suspicion; but he puts off acting on his belief from day to day, and ultimately reveals the fact that he has been harassed by doubts as to the identity of the Spirit which assumed his "noble father's person;" not being content till he had confirmed its statement by a device of his own contrivance, sufficiently ingenious, but not infallible, and which any one, who had real faith in the supernatural messenger, would have thought it neither necessary, nor becoming, to employ. In many other instances does Hamlet show how little certainty there was in his faith even on the most solemn subjects; he does not disbelieve, but neither does he believe; he wishes to do so, but his mind can not refrain from questioning everything which is not capable of absolute proof. I do not for one moment believe that Shakespeare intended to represent Hamlet as an infidel, but rather as one of those men, whom we meet not unfrequently in real life, who are deficient in that intellectual humility which is content to receive supernatural truths on some grounds other than natural evidence. The moral natures of such men are frequently of the noblest and purest type; but their practical power for good, in this world, is fettered by a constant tendency to doubt the principles of their faith just at the very moment when that prompt action, which can only spring from perfect trust and entire conviction, is necessary.

The metaphysical theories which have been put forward as explanations of the problem which Hamlet's character presents are numberless. Some of them are ridiculously far-fetched, while others are evolved more from the writer's own mind than from the text of Shakespeare. I do not wish to wrest a moral from this play, which its contents do not justify,

merely because it may accord with my own moral or religious opinions. But I think an unprejudiced mind cannot fail to be struck by the coincidence that this wonderful psychological work, which seems to bear more strongly than any the impress of the author's own mind, should have been written at a time when this country had just broken away from the old Faith, and had abandoned unquestioning obedience to the Church's authority for a partial submission to private judgment. The Catholic religion still represented, to many who had separated from Rome, all that was definite in their faith; their hearts still yearned towards that communion, and they were trying to reconcile their consciences to a compromise which was morally impossible. They could not see, or they would not acknowledge, that imperfection is a necessary quality of humanity; and therefore that abuses and scandals must exist as long as the ministers and disciples of religion are men; but that the way to get rid of these evils was not to break away from the Church, but to conform more rigidly to her Divine precepts. These men wished to preserve most of the dogmas of Catholicism, while they reserved to themselves the right to reject the authority on which their dogmas rested. The consequence was that they involved themselves in a moral dilemma; they began by asserting that each individual was bound to question the grounds of his faith by the aid of his own reason, and that thus he would arrive at truth; but having once admitted this power of questioning what claimed to be revelation, it was impossible to limit the exercise of that power; so that many minds were tossed about upon a fathomless sea of doubt, hopelessly uncertain which way to steer, no longer believing in their compass, and distrustful of the very stars by which otherwise they might have directed their course. Truth after truth, which men had long cherished as Divine, was condemned before a self-constituted court of human judges, till to some minds nothing in this world seemed certain or secure; and the very foundations of Christianity were shaken beyond repair by the same storm that had shattered the pinnacles of the edifice.

Of such minds Hamlet's is a striking type, and the creation of his character might well be the outcome of an intellect perplexed and agitated by such doubts as I have described, with a yearning desire to be convinced, but with its powers of conviction hopelessly debilitated.

APPENDIX.

APPENDIX A.

THE EARLY LIFE OF HAMLET.

IN order that we may understand more clearly the exact position in which Hamlet was placed, and the state of mind in which we find him when first introduced upon the scene, I have ventured to construct a brief ideal sketch of the events which preceded the death of Hamlet's father. The materials for this sketch I have derived partly from a study of the play itself, and partly by endeavouring, to the best of my power, to bring my imagination into harmony with the various characters and events described by Shakespeare. Following the example of Shakespeare, I have not attempted any strict accuracy with regard to the characteristics of the exact period at which Hamlet may be supposed to have lived. The manners and customs as portrayed by Shakespeare in this play, though not copied from those of his own time, are modernised sufficiently to ensure the sympathy of his auditors, without losing the picturesqueness which belongs to antiquity.

It was about twenty-five years* before the time when the play opens, that Hamlet the elder, having been challenged to single combat by Fortinbras,† a Prince of Norway, defeated and slew his challenger; thereby gaining the whole of Fortinbras' territory, which he had staked on the result of this combat, against an equal part of the territory of Denmark. On the very day when his father achieved this victory, Hamlet was born;‡ the lands won by the valour of King Hamlet remained in the undisputed possession of Denmark

* The age of Hamlet is generally held to have been thirty, chiefly on the authority of the passage in Act V., Scene 1, where the First Gravedigger says that he had been sexton "man and boy thirty years," and that he first came to the trade the day Hamlet was born. But in the Appendix I have discussed the question as to how far that passage is to be relied on as an authoritative statement of Hamlet's age. I believe Shakespeare intended him to be about twenty-five years old, certainly not more.

† *See* Appendix N.

‡ *See* Act V., Scene 1, lines 135-140.

until the son of Fortinbras, at the date when the play commences, set out on an expedition, the object of which, though not openly declared, was the forcible recovery of these same lands.

It does not appear that the peace of Denmark was threatened by any foe during the remainder of the reign of King Hamlet. The proof which he had given of high personal courage endeared him to all his subjects; and it would seem that, content with the reputation for military valour which he had thus gained, he devoted himself to the education of his only son, and to pursuits of a more contemplative and philosophical nature, than those in favour with the majority of his court.* If his marriage with Gertrude was blessed by any more offspring, we do not know; but as no mention is ever made by young Hamlet of any brother or sister, we may presume that he remained the sole object of his parent's affection: that he was, in the strongest sense of the term, his father's son, is evident; and, from the moment when he began to speak, we may imagine that father and son were nearly inseparable. King Hamlet doubtless infused into the mind of his darling boy that tendency to dreamy speculation which we find so strongly developed in him; we may be sure that the father's energies were concentrated on the education of him who daily became a more and more congenial companion; whose mind, expanding under the loving care bestowed upon it, might even have ventured on more ambitious flights, and penetrated further into that dim region of fascinating mystery, which then enshrouded the phenomena of nature, than that of his teacher. Few indeed were the writers whom they could study together: some ancient Christian writings; some manuscripts of the classics; the wild legends of the various Norse tribes; the sagas handed down by tradition from one half-savage sea-king to another; a score or so of rude plays, chiefly known only in fragments and by memory; some few books of crude philosophy, deeply tinged with the romantic credulity and legendary mysticism of the semi-barbarous authors; such, unless we stretch anachronism to its furthest limit, must have been the chief food which nourished the eagerly acquisitive mind of the young Prince. We may add some old chansons and ballads, which

* That he did not abandon military exercises or habits might be surmised from the fact that his ghost appears in full armour; but it is evident that Shakespeare intended him to appear in the same guise as he wore when he overcame Fortinbras (*see* Act I., Scene 1, lines 58—61).

MAR. Is it not like the king?
HOR. As thou art to thyself:
Such was *the very armour* he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated;

Surely this passage places beyond all doubt the fact that when the Ghost reappears in Act III., Scene 4, he should wear, not the warrior's suit of mail that he wore before, but some other more peaceful dress: for this reason Hamlet says with such emphasis—

My father, in his habit as he lived!

(*See* Part II., page 50, where I have insisted on this point.)

were preserved from mouth to mouth, and few, if any, of which would exist in writing. It would not be safe to speculate on the curriculum of the University of Wittenburg,* but we may safely conjecture that it was not so complete as the more celebrated one of Gottenburg. It must be remembered that we are dealing, not with that hopelessly obscure shadow, the Hamlet of Saxo-Grammaticus, but with Shakespeare's complex creation, the chronology of which is vague and fanciful.

As to the religion of Hamlet, Shakespeare has wisely abstained from any definite details on this point; there are some expressions, such as those of the ghost, "unhousel'd" and "unanel'd," plainly borrowed from Catholic ritual; Shakespeare uses these by poetical license; he probably intended us to understand some rude form of Christianity as existing in Denmark at the time.† Hamlet uses the expression "I will go pray;" and although the poet has wisely abstained from putting any dogmatic expressions into the mouth of his hero, it is evident that Hamlet was deeply imbued with the spirit of reverence for the Divine Creator, and with a love of virtue and a hatred of vice far beyond most of his compeers.

Let us imagine Hamlet, now grown into a handsome and graceful youth, the idol of his father, the pride of his mother, in Ophelia's beautiful words—

> The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form—

let us picture how his days were passed at that grand old castle of Elsinore. Horatio and Laertes were his two most loved companions, with whom he would engage in feats of activity or trials of skill, generally coming off the victor, except when his dreamy nature got the better of him; and then he would be roused by some sudden ignominious defeat, in a bout with the rapiers, or a tilt at the quintain, and would put forth all his energy, wringing victory from his worthy competitors, who would be the first to join in the hearty applause which greeted the efforts of their darling prince. We can picture Ophelia looking on, drinking deeply of that sweet poison of love, dreaming happy dreams which were never to be realised. Later in the day Hamlet might be wandering by his father's side along the edge of those grand rugged cliffs on which the castle stood; the two, sitting down and gazing into the blue depths beneath them, recalling some wild legend of syrens or mermaids, or of those weird monsters with which the rude imagination of our forefathers peopled the sea; sitting, perhaps, on that very spot to which, but a few years afterwards, the armed

* The University of Wittenburg was not founded till 1502; but in this passage I am supposing that such an university existed in the time of Hamlet.

† *See* the speech of Marcellus, Act I., Scene 1—

> Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

And also the churchyard scene, Act V., Scene 1.

phantom of the father, "clad in complete steel," led the awe-struck son to listen to that solemn legacy of vengeance beneath the burden of which he sank.

Meanwhile, slowly but surely, the seeds of misery and crime were being sown in that household; spite of that reverential fondness for his wife, that noble love which went "hand-in-hand even with the vow he made to her in marriage;" spite of his god-like beauty of person, his sweet gentleness of heart, Gertrude was becoming day by day estranged from her husband. She could not enter into the dreamy philosophy which was the charm of his own and of his son's life; and, not unnaturally, she would be thrown more and more into the society of Claudius, whose coarse and sensuous nature fitted him, much more than his brother, to preside over the rude hospitalities which were a necessity of royal households in those days.* Claudius loved barbaric splendour and show; while King Hamlet was nothing loth often to resign to him his seat at the head of the well-spread board; especially when flagon after flagon of wine had to be drained to the health of the noble guests, or in honour of some of the reigning beauties. Gertrude, woman-like, loved pageantry and revelry; to her it was dull to sit and listen to war-like sagas, or wild legends, such as her husband loved to hear recited; she grew day by day to look on the King as a being far above her, and to feel more and more sympathy with the showy qualities, the animal spirits, and the plausible gallantry of Claudius, who saw, in the growing neglect by his brother of the more ornamental duties of his royal office, a channel by which he might creep into popular favour, to court which he spared no labour.

The contrast between the two brothers grew stronger with every year of the elder's reign. The qualities of King Hamlet were precisely those which courtiers and mob would least comprehend, or value, in the time of peace. When there was any heroic deed of valour to be done, the nobility of his nature would show forth itself with such splendour as completely to dazzle the eyes of all the undiscerning, no less than of the discerning. But as long as there were only State ceremonies, royal banquets, or military dis-

* It has occurred to me that it is just possible Shakespeare might have glanced obliquely at Henry VIII. in the character of Claudius. It may be said that any disrespectful allusion to her father's marriage with his brother's widow would not have been tolerated by Elizabeth; but by insisting on the incestuous nature of such an union Shakespeare might well have expected to please the daughter of Anne Boleyn, who with all her pride in her father could scarcely have forgot the humiliation to which she had been subjected in her youth. I do not for one moment intend to suggest any parallel between Gertrude and the virtuous Catherine of Arragon. Shakespeare has done that much-wronged Queen full justice in another play. The question as to when Henry VIII. was first represented would have to be determined before the conjecture I have hazarded could be discussed. But the main features of Claudius's character are sufficiently like those of the Great Tudor King's to render it at least as plausible as many other conjectures in connection with the prototypes of Shakespeare's characters.

plays, to vary the monotony of court life, Claudius could easily outshine him, and could win the admiration of the vulgar; the many virtues of King Hamlet, the lofty dignity of his presence, the noble grace of his manner, were eclipsed by the supple condescension, the smiling familiarity, the plausible good humour, of Claudius. We can imagine the two brothers taking part in some royal procession; the King riding by, with his darling son by his side, bowing graciously in acknowledgment of the salutations of the crowd; but on his beautiful face a far-off expression, as if he were absorbed in some region of thought higher than the scene around him; smiling rarely, save when he turned towards the young prince: the crowd greeted him, as he passed, with reverence, some with love; but their heartiest cheers were for the gorgeously dressed Claudius, who followed, lavishing on all around him smiles that seemed full of cordiality and kind-heartedness; going out of his way to recognise some slight acquaintance, or to kiss his hand in complimentary admiration of some pretty face; full of rude but good-humoured jests; in short, brimming over with those coarse animal spirits which are so attractive to common-place minds. Many a sturdy Danish citizen might turn round to his companion and whisper some such words as these: "The King's all very well in his way, but he's too solemn for me; give me Claudius, jovial Claudius;" and then would come a shout of "Bravo, Claudius!"

At court the efforts of this amiable brother to gain popularity were neither less strenuous nor less successful. He flattered and cajoled everyone, from the Lord Chamberlain downwards, making it his business to humour all their weaknesses and vanities, as well as to gratify their senses with grand banquets and lavish entertainments. The growing unfitness of Hamlet the elder for the task of government, his neglect of ceremonies and outward shows, his passion for retirement, and his absorption in philosophical studies, were all brought into prominence: while the eccentric disposition of the young prince was good-naturedly ridiculed; his irresolution, his spasmodic activity, his impulsive generosity, his reckless unconventionality, were subjects of court gossip; his amiability, his noble and lovable nature were artfully praised; while his talent for practical administration, his fitness for the duties of a king, especially in any crisis of the State, were denied. Before he ventured to take his brother's life, Claudius had made sure of securing his crown with the consent of the majority of the servile unprincipled creatures who surrounded the throne.

How long the intrigue between this double-traitor and the Queen had been going on before the murder of King Hamlet we have no means of ascertaining. No doubt passion had less to do with the crime of Claudius than ambition; he saw that an intrigue with his brother's Queen would secure for him a very important ally in his designs on the throne; her manifest partiality for him suggested the idea of compromising her so far as to render his pretension to

her husband's place on the throne, as well as in her heart, one which she at least could never oppose. It is likely that as their intimacy became closer, and they became bound by the almost indissoluble tie of mutual guilt, Claudius came to conceive as much affection for Gertrude as his selfish and debased nature could entertain for any human being ;* but his love was never so absorbing or self-devoted as to offer any excuse for his crime.

Having secured the affection, or the caprice, or the passion of Gertrude—by whichever term we may choose to designate that vicious impulse which teaches women but too often to betray a generous and loving husband for the sake of a mean and selfish lover—and having laid the foundations of a popularity, both with the common people and the courtiers, sufficient to warrant his usurpation† of the crown in the event of the King's death, it only remained for Claudius to bring about that event in such a manner

* If we are to believe his own words to Laertes, he was completely enthralled by his love (Act IV., Scene 7). Laertes has asked why Claudius did not proceed against Hamlet for having attempted his life, to which the King answers—

> O, for two special reasons,
> Which may to you perhaps seem much unsinew'd,
> But yet to me they're strong. The queen his mother
> Lives almost by his looks ; and for myself—
> My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
> She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
> That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
> I could not but by her.

But as he had already taken the most treacherous steps to procure the death of Hamlet, it is evident that his tender dread of wounding Gertrude's feelings on that point was not so strong but that prudential reasons might overcome it ; and, as he goes on to allege another reason why he shrank from punishing Hamlet, namely, the affection entertained for him by the people, we shall not be doing Claudius a great injustice if we believe that the latter reason was the more cogent one of the two. We have another incident in the play by which we can test the strength of the love which Claudius bore to Gertrude : in the last scene of all, when the Queen takes up the poisoned cup, surely a man who loved her so passionately and devotedly, as from the above declaration to Laertes we should expect to find Claudius did, would have dashed the cup out of her hand, before she could drink from it, at any risk : but he contents himself with exclaiming—

> Gertrude, do not drink.

It may be said that dramatic exigency is responsible for this, as the Queen was to be killed somehow or other, and this was the easiest way ; but I do not believe the end of this play to be careless or haphazard work on Shakespeare's part ; I believe it to be carefully planned and consistent, and that we must regard Claudius as being so intent upon his treacherous design against the life of Hamlet that he cares for little else.

† I have used the word usurpation, though the crown of Denmark might, as Steevens and others maintain, have been an elective one ; yet I cannot but think that Shakespeare intended to represent the kingdom of Denmark as possessing the same legalised custom which existed in most other countries—namely, that the eldest son, failing any actual disqualification, should succeed to the crown. The coronation of Claudius might have been sanctioned by the Council only on condition that Hamlet should be recognised as his successor.

as not to excite the suspicions of the most influential persons around the throne.

In order to carry out the last part of his scheme, the absence of Prince Hamlet was necessary; whether that was effected at the instigation of Claudius, or by the voluntary act of the Prince himself, does not appear. It is possible that he had been at Wittenberg some time when he received the news of his father's death, but it is more probable that he had returned there after a short stay at Elsinore,* during which his love for Ophelia had taken more definite shape, and had even been allowed to grow insensibly into an engagement by which, though no troth had been absolutely pledged by either, each felt silently bound to the other. As yet there had been no interference with their love, but during this last stay of Hamlet's at Elsinore the suspicions of Polonius had been aroused.† The letter‡ which he reads to the King (Act II., Scene 2), if not written from Wittenberg, was sent to Ophelia by Hamlet shortly

* This may seem at variance with what I have said in the text (page 16 near the bottom of page), but I only intended there to express my belief that Hamlet's boyhood and youth, up to the time of his going to the University, were passed in his father's palace.

† Polonius says, Act I., Scene 3, lines 91-95—

> 'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late
> Given private time to you, and you yourself
> Have of your audience been most free and bounteous:
> If it be so—as so 'tis put on me,
> And that in way of caution—

which would seem to be at variance with what he says to the King, Act II., Scene 2, lines 131-133—

> When I had seen this hot love on the wing,—
> As I perceived it, I must tell you that,
> Before my daughter told me,—

It may be that Hamlet's attachment to Ophelia seemed of little importance to the courtiers and others during the life of the King his father, but assumed greater importance now that the young prince was acknowledged by all parties to be in the position of heir-apparent to the throne. The expression, 'of late,' cannot be held to refer to the very short period which had elapsed since the death of the King; for it is not probable that being in the state of dejection in which we find him, Hamlet would have found time to pay such marked attentions to Ophelia as to arouse suspicions, for the first time, of his relations towards her.

‡ This letter, it may be remembered, runs thus:—

'To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia,'—

. . . . . .

'In her excellent white bosom, these,' &c.

. . . . . .

> 'Doubt thou the stars are fire;
> Doubt that the sun doth move;
> Doubt truth to be a liar;
> But never doubt I love.

'O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers; I have not art to reckon my groans: but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

> 'Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this
> machine is to him, HAMLET.'

after the period at which the play opens; and was probably given to Polonius by her in the interval between Act II., Scene 1, and the subsequent Scene. It is the only letter which Ophelia seems to have shown to her father, and considering its affected style and brevity, we may conclude that she made less objection to showing it than she would have made, if it had been expressed in more natural language. This letter, indeed, presents many difficulties:* it would almost seem, at first sight, to be written purposely to puzzle those into whose hands it might fall, and impress them with an idea of the writer's being out of his mind; but a much more probable explanation is, that it was written in answer to some self-reproach or remonstrance from Ophelia on account of his apparent neglect of her, and under the constraint of the great shock his mind had received, when he could not even turn his thoughts towards the object of his love without great effort. It is plain, from Ophelia's language, Act II., Scene 1—

> as you did command,
> I did repel his letters and denied
> His access to me—

that Hamlet, after the letter, did not abandon his suit;† so that all question as to the sincerity of this letter, whatever be its date, is set at rest. Of the effect likely to be produced upon Hamlet's mind by this enforced coldness of Ophelia at such a time, I have spoken in the text (page 25).

But let us revert to the condition of affairs when Hamlet left for Wittenberg. The parting between father and son was, doubtless, a most sad one; in the mind of the younger there might be some strange foreboding, indefinite in shape, never uttered, but centred in the person of that uncle whose plausible cordiality was less likely to deceive a keen-witted young man, and one who had such a detestation of insincerity as Hamlet had: but this suspicion was con-

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* *See* Appendix D. In the Quarto, 1603, Polonius distinctly says that it was owing to the discovery of this letter that he forbade Ophelia to hold any more intercourse with Hamlet. *See* Allen's Reprint of "The Devonshire Hamlets," p. 33:

CORAMBIS (*i.e.* POLONIUS). Now when I saw this letter, thus I bespake my maiden:

> Lord Hamlet is a prince out of your starre,
> And one that is unequall for your love:
> Therefore I did command her refuse his letters,
> Deny his tokens, and to absent herselfe," &c.

This difference is very striking, and cannot have arisen from any mere carelessness in transcription.

† The 'letters' mentioned by Ophelia probably contained appeals to her sympathy and remonstrances with her on account of her coldness to him: it is only fair, in estimating Hamlet's conduct to Ophelia, to remember how inexplicable to him must have appeared her obstinate silence at such a time. Ophelia's implicit obedience to her father is a most important point in her character.

fined to Claudius; not the shadow of a cloud besmirched the lustre of his mother's purity.

His darling boy gone, the lonely father, surrounded by uncongenial minds, turned back with a heavy heart to the home which had lost its dearest charm. True, his queen was there; but while his manner to her was always tender, gentle, and full of that dignified courtesy which noble natures ever display towards women, he could not but feel there was something lacking. Meditative natures are not the least selfish: philosophy, 'divine contemplation,' mystic dreaminess, usurped more and more of his time; his thoughts soared farther and farther away from that narrow spot of earth where such a terrible tragedy was preparing, of which he himself was to be the first victim. Gertrude found it easier to silence the voice of conscience the more she was left to the two alternatives, solitude, or the companionship of Claudius; passion makes but short work of idle hours; where the mind lacks resources the devil's work is easy: the treacherous brother left her no time to think; the slightest sigh of remorse, the slightest tremor of guilt, was smothered with fervid kisses, or crushed by the pressure of a devoted hand. The time was come to destroy the only obstacle to his ambition and to his passion—the opportunity was easily found. Regularly, after his frugal meal was finished, the King would steal away from the table, glad to escape from the revelry which he detested, and snatch an hour's repose in the privacy of his orchard: to follow him unobserved was easy; the poison is poured into the ear of the unsuspecting sleeper; the murderer repairs to the banqueting room, and the carouse is prolonged, so that as much time may elapse as possible before any search may be made for the King: his absence would not be observed till evening came; the body is found: no mark of violence is visible; from some quiet corner the rumour is set about that poisonous snakes have been seen in the orchard; that the King has received his death-wound from one; the superstitious horror, attaching to those reptiles, makes this suggestion readily received; due lamentation is made by the living; due honours are paid to the dead. Claudius receives the Court with a well-compounded expression of grief and patriotic anxiety on his features, and a large mourning-cloak wrapped round his form—a pattern of brotherly affliction; while the widow at home keeps her waiting-women well employed as spectators of, and ministers to, her passionate lamentation.

But little now remains to be done to bring the excellent Claudius' plans to perfection. The young prince is away at college; the times are troublous; danger threatens the State; a firm hand is needed to guide the helm: the young Hamlet is amiable, clever, no one has a word to say against his character, but—is he the man for the hour? What if Claudius would act as regent? or, could he be persuaded to step in, and save the throne threatened by the attack of the fiery young Fortinbras? The heart-broken

brother lays aside his heavy mourning-cloak, and listens graciously to the entreaties of the patriotic courtiers; he loves his nephew devotedly, as he loved his dear lost brother—but he loves his country more—still he fears the cares—the burdens of royalty—just now—might be too heavy for him. If the widowed Queen would but let him try and fill his brother's place! if she would consent to a marriage with her son's natural guardian! the succession would be secured to that son, and the throne saved from all dangers. But no time must be lost—Fortinbras and his desperate levies are on the point of embarking; instant preparation for war must be made. The people have no time to think. The nobles of the court are so bewildered with cajoleries and gorged with bribes, small wonder if their respectable consciences are caught napping. In the bustle of fitting out men and ships, and forging implements of war,* busy natures find their immediate and safest employment; Claudius is crowned king; the hasty wedding takes place, so hastily that there is no leisure to reflect upon its propriety; and when Hamlet arrives in sorrowful haste from Wittenberg,† yearning to throw himself into his mother's arms, and weep upon her sympathising breast, he finds that breast palpitating with the emotions of an affianced bride; he finds the father's brother has proved a more effectual comforter than the father's son can ever hope to be.

* See Act I., Scene 1, Marcellus' speech, lines 70—78:

> tell me, he that knows,
> Why this same strict and most observant watch
> So nightly toils the subject of the land,
> And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
> And foreign mart for implements of war;
> Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
> Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
> What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
> Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:

† That Hamlet was absent from Elsinore at the time of his father's murder we cannot doubt; for he could not have been so ignorant of the alleged circumstances of his father's death as he appears to have been from the care with which the Ghost impresses them upon him in their solemn interview. Nor can we conceive that Claudius' plot could have met with the success it did had not the young Prince been absent: the King's allusion to his desire to return to Wittenberg (Act I., Scene 2, lines 112-113) points to the same conclusion. But that he must have arrived in time for the funeral would appear from his allusion in the first soliloquy to Gertrude's demeanour (Act I., Scene 2, lines 147-149)—

> or ere those shoes were old
> With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears:—

and still more from the lines in Hamlet's speech to the Ghost (Act I., Scene 4, lines 47-48)—

> why the sepulchre,
> Wherein *we* saw thee quietly inurn'd,

which would seem to set the question at rest. The use of the word 'cerements' shows that the body was embalmed, so that the funeral need not have taken place till some days after the death.

Who can contemplate unmoved the agony of this generous young heart?—the very faintest portraiture thereof fills us with sympathetic grief as we gaze on it. It was not that henceforth he was parentless, nay, worse; it was not that he had suddenly lost one who had been to him friend, brother, father, almost a god; it was not the miserable regret, so vain, yet so gnawing, that the last farewell had never been spoken; it was not that where he might have hoped to find the gentlest consolation, he found the cruellest aggravation of his sorrow: it was that in her—who should have been the spotless mirror on which he might behold his grief reflected with a grandeur and a purity, the very first glimpse of which would transform him from the heart-broken, despairing mourner into the courageous and hopeful comforter—it was that in the widowed mother, standing before him, decked in bridal robes, with wanton smiles glaring on the scarce-dried traces of hypocritical tears, he saw every feeling that man should hold most dear and most sacred, he saw every idea of goodness, of fidelity, of purity, of love, that should nourish the life-blood of man's heart—all these he saw deformed, blasphemed, drenched in such a torrent of filthy associations, that few could blame the son if he rushed from the presence of that incestuous wife and infamous mother, a very fiend; without hope, without mercy, without belief in aught good or pure, ripe for every crime and dead to every virtue.

It is necessary to realise the fearful shock which Hamlet's moral nature has sustained, before the play opens, in order thoroughly to comprehend, much more to represent, his character.

Appendix B.

on hamlet's first soliloquy.

I have thought it better to relegate to the Appendix, for the most part, such observations on the various soliloquies as I may desire to make, the more especially as I shall attempt to give some hints as to the manner in which they should be delivered.

The soliloquy is one of the finest tests of the genius of a dramatic writer. Imagination may devise ingenious plots; Wit or Pathos may produce brilliant or moving dialogue; Talent may construct good plays; but Genius alone can create character—Genius alone can dissect the inner workings of a man's mind; and this is what a soliloquy, to be worth anything, must do. If we compare the best of his contemporaries, or of succeeding dramatists, with Shakespeare in this respect, we shall see at once his immense superiority. Perhaps the soliloquies of Hamlet are finer than even those of Macbeth and Othello; certainly the character is one which lends itself more readily to that form of dramatic treatment. But if to write a soliloquy is difficult, to deliver it is no less so;

and it is in this point that most actors who attempt the *rôle* of Hamlet most utterly fail. The impression produced on me by nearly all the Hamlets I have seen on the stage, when they commenced a soliloquy, has been that they were going to "speak a piece," as the Americans say; that they had composed an harangue which was to be delivered at, and to, the audience; not that they were in any way giving utterance to the perplexities of their mind or to the feelings of their heart.* Nor in many tragedies, especially modern ones, is the actor to blame, for the words he has to speak in soliloquy are too often set orations, and not thoughts uttered aloud; but in representing Hamlet no one can urge this excuse.

In this very soliloquy how natural are the sentiments, how spontaneous and unstudied the words, how unforced are the transitions! And so it is with all the subsequent ones in this play—the language is such a correct and life-like transcription of Hamlet's thoughts that we almost forget that the character is fictitious.

It is a matter for the actor's own choice whether he should be seated or standing at the commencement of this soliloquy. If Hamlet has been sitting, as he naturally would be, during the preceding portion of the scene, he might remain so without any discourtesy to the King and Court, or to the Queen and her ladies; indeed, it would be more consonant with his absorption in sorrow that he should forget to rise when the others do.

As Claudius passes out, with Gertrude by his side, he stops for a moment and looks, half curiously, half angrily, at the unmoved figure of Hamlet. He stands between him and his mother, as if fearful lest she, in an outburst of tenderness, should draw from him a confession of his secret thoughts—some dangerous suspicion, perhaps, of that "foul play" which haunts the guilty conscience of Claudius; then follow the courtiers, laughing and talking to one another, utterly indifferent to Hamlet's grief or to the tragic circumstances which caused it; Ophelia,† who has been watching the dejected visage of her lover with tender anxiety, lingers behind the rest, and is about to lay her hand upon his shoulder when Laertes checks her and, with a look of kindly remonstrance, leads her out of the audience-chamber. Hamlet, unconscious of all that is passing, remains wrapped in his melancholy thoughts till the last footfall has died away. Then with a deep sigh he raises his head, and in a subdued but earnest voice he utters that prayer for annihilation—

> O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

* This was written before I had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Irving, whose treatment of the soliloquies is one of the most remarkable features of a marvellously intellectual performance.

† Was Ophelia meant to be present during this scene? In the second, third, and fourth Folios her name is inserted; in the Quartos (except 1603) it might be included in "Cum Aliis." It would certainly add to the interest of the scene if she were present, and I can see no objection to such an arrangement as the one I have sketched out.

Truly to him the body is the prison of the soul, and the walls which enclose her seem terribly solid. Hamlet's is not one of those frail bodies which grief sometimes inhabits; in which "the soul seems," as Fuller says, "to peep through the chinks of her prison-house."*

The solemn words that follow—

> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!

show that Hamlet was no infidel, though his faith was enervated by doubts. There is deep pathos in that cry—

> O God! God!
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!

It is a cry that many of us have uttered in the agonising perplexity caused by the apparent triumph of Evil around us. It is to be noted how the words here echo the sense. Too much pains cannot be bestowed on the utterance of these lines. I have heard them spoken with such a deep thrill of despair in the voice as to be indeed awful. The exclamation

> Fie on't! ah fie!

has been variously interpreted. Edmund Kean applied them to the conduct of Gertrude; but they seem more naturally to be directed against the world. The actor might rise here from his seat, and after the words

> Possess it merely.

pause a little; then, taking one or two paces to and fro, as a man will do when the mind is on the rack, he exclaims—

> That it should come to this!

That all the love and tenderness which his father had lavished on Gertrude should be so rewarded! that her fond caresses should come to be such bitter mockeries! that all the honour, the happiness, the peace, the pride of his home, should be thus rudely shattered! What art, and what nature, in that hasty correction of his own words—

> nay, not so much, not two:

followed by the outburst of praise of his father's qualities, first as king, then as husband—

> so loving to my mother,
> That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly.

There never was a more beautiful picture of conjugal tenderness than this. I would caution the actor here against showing any tenderness in his voice at the word "mother"; Hamlet so loathes the conduct of his mother, he is so overpowered by the disgust which her base treason to his father's memory inspires in him that

* I am bound to say that I have not been able to verify this quotation.

he can hardly bear to mention her name. Even when he has received the strongest injunction from his father's spirit to treat her with gentle consideration he finds it very difficult to obey.

The exclamation

> Heaven and earth!
> Must I remember?

is one of the most impassioned in the whole range of tragedy. Hamlet breaks off in his description of his father's tenderness; the picture is more than he can bear; he would raze out of his mind all record of the past, but the tyranny of memory cannot be shaken off:—

> why, she would hang on him,
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on: and yet, within a month—

It was not alone the perfection of his father's love to her, the sweet solicitude, the ever-watchful protection with which he cherished her—but her demonstrative affection for him, her clinging dependence on the husband, who has been dead only a month, and she—— Hamlet cannot bring himself to give a name to her deed. Once more, in vain, he tries to put the fact away from him—he tries in a general sarcasm to dismiss the very thought of it—

> Frailty, thy name is woman!—

but his mind returns to it, and his indignation is heightened by a fresh detail—

> ere those shoes were old
> With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears:—

a most beautiful detail it is—probably the result of Hamlet's own observation at the funeral. Again he breaks off with a stronger expression of indignation against his mother's conduct:

> O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
> Would have mourn'd longer,—

Then, with the utmost contempt, he at last gives a name to her crime—

> married with my uncle,
> My father's brother, but no more like my father
> Than I to Hercules:

The contrast between the tenderness with which he pronounces the name of "father," and the loathing with which he utters that of "uncle," is most marked, and there is a noble scorn in the last words repudiating any resemblance between them. It adds greatly to the effect of this passage, if the actor gives to the simile, used here by Hamlet, an air of natural spontaneity by a slight hesitation after the words "Than I to—," as if the speaker were trying to think of what he was most unlike; then adding "Hercules" with an emphasis, as much as to say, "There could be no two persons more dissimilar than I, the sensitive, hesitating, meditative Hamlet, and Hercules, the ideal of physical strength and perseverance in overcoming

tremendous obstacles." On the stage the next four lines are generally omitted; but with no little injury to the completeness of the speech, as indignation and scorn begin here to give way to that pathos which culminates in the last two lines. How fine is the expression—

the salt of most unrighteous tears.

With a righteous awe of such an infamy Hamlet exclaims—

O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

He is exhausted with the vehemence of his feelings, and gloomy forebodings as to the future once more fill his mind:

It is not, nor it cannot come to good:

then, sinking into his chair, as he feels at once the mightiness of Evil around him, and his own powerlessness to crush it, he utters that touching lamentation—

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!

Appendix C.

On the Soliloquy, "O all you host of heaven!"

This soliloquy is not a long one; but it is a very important one. It is the key-note to that wild perturbation of mind in which Hamlet remains during the rest of this act. The vehement aspiration with which it commences—

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell?

is succeeded by the expression—

O, fie!

which recalls to our memories the words in the former soliloquy—

Fie on't! ah fie!

Here the exclamation may be taken in two ways; either as a self-rebuke for the mention of hell, or as a reproach directed against his own weakness on the part of Hamlet. I think the latter the best interpretation, especially if we consider the words which follow immediately—

Hold, hold, my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up.

The next words—

Remember thee!

are spoken with intense pathos, and the repetition of them with still greater intensity. From this moment Hamlet wishes to become a man of one idea only; self-indulgence, ambition, love, must have no longer any place in his mind—

And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter:

Then comes the climax of the oath—

yes, by heaven !

After this there is a pause; first the baseness of his mother's conduct recurs to his agitated mind; then we have an outburst against the King, his uncle, which contains a key to the character of that villain—a key which no manager, or actor, or commentator ever seems to have seized—namely, the fact that the distinguishing feature of Claudius was his bland and amiable plausibility—

O, villain, villain, smiling, damned villain !
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain ;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.

The stage direction (*Writing*), which follows here, shows that Hamlet was intended to record something of what preceded on his tablets, and the very fact of his doing so is a proof of the nervous agitation under which he laboured; his furious indignation against his uncle found vent in this mere act of writing him down a "smiling villain." The words—

So, uncle, there you are.

are spoken as he puts the tablets up; then recovering, by a great effort, command over himself, he speaks with solemn emphasis the lines—

Now to my word ;
It is 'Adieu, adieu ! remember me.'
I have sworn't.

drawing his sword at the last words, and devoutly kissing the cross which forms the handle.

Appendix D.

ON THE CHARACTER OF OPHELIA.

I should have thought that the slight allusion I have made in the text to the question of Ophelia's purity was more than sufficient, but I am astonished to find that persons, whose intellect at any rate entitles them to respect, have held, and do still hold, that she was Hamlet's mistress. I cannot imagine that they have studied the text of the play with any care or reverence; but it is the characteristic of our enlightened age to be sceptical of good and credulous of evil. In such an age it is an easier task to make men believe that Ophelia was unchaste, because in her distraction she sings some verses of an impure song, than to prove to them from a close study of what she says, and what is said about her, when in her right senses, that she was chaste. We shall be told that we know so many women are bad, but can only believe that many are good. Faith in anything,

except our own wisdom, is one of those superstitions which it is the mission of philosophy, as nineteenth-century philosophers understand it, to crush. The views of Ophelia's character, adverse to her purity, vary from the uncompromising assertion of her having yielded to Hamlet's solicitations, to the sensuo-romantic portrait of her drawn by Goethe, and, to a certain extent, approved by Gervinus. As an instance of the first opinion I may mention the answer of a great French actor—the son of a greater, whose name is associated with one of the finest representations of Hamlet ever given in a foreign tongue—who, when asked if he believed that Ophelia had been seduced by Hamlet, replied, "*Oui, je crois qu'il était heureux dans ses amours.*" This is so characteristic of the Parisian—in contradistinction to the Frenchman—who believes that the final cause of every woman's creation, whether single or married, is to sacrifice her honour to the fascinations of some '*cher garçon*'—himself, of course, if he tries. It is only when the theory is practically illustrated by the wives of their own vanity that these irrepressible creatures object to the practice.

The best way to treat this question will be to give, first, the passages from Gervinus and Goethe which bear upon it; secondly, the passages, in the play itself, on which I rely for the complete vindication of Ophelia's purity.

This is the passage in Gervinus,* a very beautiful passage, with the latter part of which I thoroughly agree, but some of the conclusions in which I think quite unjustifiable :—

"Still more reproachable does Hamlet appear to us in his relation to his beloved one. Goethe said of Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia, that it was without conspicuous passion. The poet has at any rate not exhibited him to us in a position in which this passion appears pre-eminent. When he casts his love in the scale with that of forty thousand brothers, the exaggeration of the tone affords no standard. Beyond this passage, Shakespeare has only once allowed him a direct opportunity, in a few aside-spoken words, to give us the key to his feeling for Ophelia, in those words which precede his conversation with her—'Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered!'—words which we have heard uttered by famous actors strangely enough in a tone of comical or facetious address. On the other hand, this very conversation affords the actor scope sufficient to intimate *indirectly* the nature of Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia. If the actor does not here 'tear the passion to tatters,' he will bring the spectator in this scene into a heavy and profound sadness, the very mood in which the conversation leaves Ophelia; it is the farewell of an unhappy heart to a connection broken by fate; it is the serious advice of a self-interested lover, who sends his beloved to a nunnery because he grudges her to another, and sees the path of his own future lie in hopeless darkness. All that in his treatment of Ophelia's father, in his disregard of her brother, in his coldness and indifference

* "Shakespeare Commentaries." By Dr. G. G. Gervinus. Translated by F. E. Bunnètt. New edition, revised by the translator. Smith and Elder. 1875. Pages 579-580.

towards Polonius, aye, even in her own death, may appear heartless and inconsiderate, is consistent even with a predominant passion for Ophelia in this strange-natured man. His mother regarded this connection as serious in spite of the inequality of station between the two lovers; his oaths to Ophelia we cannot indeed consider in Hamlet as incipient deception. As a son he loved his father with enthusiastic reverence, without being able to do anything for him for the sake of love, and his mother also, without being able to adhere to his father's exhortation not to torment the weak and deluded woman. Thus he may also have loved Ophelia with a warm heart, without contradicting the apparently most contradictory quality of his nature, that cold egotism with which he torments her first with his madness, then leaves her, and after the unhappy death of her father, devoid of sympathy and sensible to nothing but his own misery, abandons her to despair and insanity. We must seek the counterpart to these traits of character in the history of the affections of equally gifted beings, in whose unfortified souls we shall not unfreqnently meet with this blending of the most sensitive feeling and cold hard-heartedness. These very traits will afford us moreover the key-note for Hamlet's intercourse with Ophelia. At his first approach, inexperienced and unsuspicious, she has given him her heart; she has been free in her audience with him, so that neighbours perceiving it have warned the family, and the family have warned herself; his conversation with her is equivocal, and not as Romeo, Bassanio, or even Proteus have spoken with their beloved ones. This has infected her imagination with sensual images, and inspired her in her quiet modesty with amorous passions; this is apparent in the songs she sings in her delirium, and in the significant flowers she distributes, as clearly as anything so hidden in its nature can and may be unveiled. Further than this we would not venture to go with Goethe's apprehension of this character. Far less can we accept those other views, which returned to the rude legend in 'Saxo Grammaticus,' regarding Ophelia as a fallen innocent. It would not have been in accordance with the fine feeling of Shakespeare to have made the brother utter those sublime words over the corpse of such a fallen one, when the priest would fain refuse her 'sanctified ground'—

> A ministering angel shall my sister be,
> When thou liest howling.

It would not have been like the poet to say expressly over her grave:—

> From her fair and unpolluted flesh
> May violets spring!

It would indeed have been a frivolous insult to innocence in the most solemn place and moment."

Goethe's theory of the character of Ophelia and of her relations to Hamlet is found in the following passages of "Wilhelm Meister,"* which I give in their entirety:—

* Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship." Translated by R. Dillon Boylan, Esq. 1872. Bohn's Standard Library. I have quoted from this translation as being more generally accessible than Carlyle's, though the latter undoubtedly more faithfully represents the original. Where there is any important difference between the two I have given Carlyle's version in the footnotes.

Aurelia exclaimed, "You owe us the conclusion of Hamlet. I do not wish to press you, for I am anxious that my brother should hear you as well as myself, but pray let me hear your thoughts about Ophelia."

"There is not much to be said about her," replied Wilhelm, "for her character is drawn by a few master-strokes. Her whole existence flows in sweet and ripe sensation. Her attachment to the prince, to whose hand she may aspire, flows so spontaneously, her affectionate heart yields so completely to its impulse, that both her father and brother are afraid, and both give her plain and direct warning of her danger. Decorum, like the thin crape upon her bosom, cannot conceal the motions of her heart, but on the contrary it betrays them. Her imagination is engaged, her silent modesty breathes a sweet desire, and if the convenient goddess Opportunity should shake the tree, the fruit would quickly fall." *

"And then," said Aurelia, "when she sees herself forsaken, rejected and despised, when everything is overturned in the soul of her distracted lover, and he offers her the bitter goblet of sorrow in place of the sweet cup of affection ——"

"Her heart breaks,"—Wilhelm, "the entire edifice of her being is loosened from its hold, the death of her father knocks fearfully against it, and the whole structure is overturned." (Book IV., Chapter XIV.)

And—

"Permit me to ask you a question," said Aurelia. "I have again examined Ophelia's part, and I am pleased with it, and feel sure that upon certain conditions I should be able to act it. But tell me, is it not your opinion that the poet ought to have written songs of a different kind for the insane maiden? And might we not for this purpose even select a few fragments from some of our own melancholy ballads? Expressions of double meaning and indelicate allusions† do not become the pure lips of a noble-minded girl."

"My good friend," said Wilhelm, "even upon this point, I cannot coincide with you. A deep meaning is concealed in these peculiarities and in this impropriety. Have we not an intimation from the very beginning of the play of the subject with which the thoughts of the maiden are engaged? She pursues her course in silent secrecy, but without being able wholly to conceal her wishes and her longing. The voice of desire has echoed within her soul,‡ and she has often tried like an unskilful nurse to lull her senses to repose with ballads, which have only kept her more awake. But at length when all self-control is at an end, and the secrets of her heart appear upon her tongue, that tongue betrays her, and in the innocence of her madness, even in the presence of royalty she takes delight in the echo of her loose but dearly-loved songs of 'The maiden whose heart

* Carlyle thus renders this passage: "Her fancy is smit; a silent modesty breathes amiable desire; and if the friendly goddess Opportunity should shake the tree, its fruit would fall.

† "Lascivious insipidities" (Carlyle).

‡ "The tones of desire were in secret ringing through her soul" (Carlyle).

was won,' 'The maid who stole to meet the youth,' and so forth." (Book IV., Chapter XVI.)

Now let us see what Shakespeare makes the various characters in the play say to, and of, Ophelia.

This is how her brother speaks to her. (Act I, Scene 3, lines 5-10):

LAER. For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.
OPH. No more but so?

Mark here the sweet simplicity of her words. She does not fly into a passion with her brother for the low estimate he takes of her lover's constancy and of her own worthiness. There is a quiet confidence in her own belief, a gentle rebuke to his worldly scepticism, which Laertes does not perceive, in this truly virginal remonstrance.

LAER. Think it no more:
For nature crescent does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but, as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal. Perhaps he loves you now;
And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will: but you must fear,
His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own;
For he himself is subject to his birth:
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state,
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head. Then if he says he loves you,
It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
As he in his particular act and place
May give his saying deed; which is no further
Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal.
Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmaster'd importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
The chariest maid is prodigal enough,
If she unmask her beauty to the moon:
Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes:
The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent.
Be wary then; best safety lies in fear:
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.

Now the whole of this speech is accepted by Gervinus and

Goethe, in perfect good faith, as the wise counsel given, not before it was needed, to a sister who had been too free in her intercourse with a young prince, his friend. They entirely miss the exquisite satire of Shakespeare who, in this speech, makes the chivalrous but worldly son imitate his pragmatical and time-serving father. The impudence of such a speech, the contemptible narrowness of mind which it exhibits, the low view of women, all consistent with the character of Laertes, a high-spirited but unprincipled young man, who spent most of his time in France—then as now the country of pleasure and the head-quarters of philosophical libertinism—quite escape them. Let us listen to the gracious dignity of Ophelia's answer:

OPH. I shall the effect of this good lesson keep,
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whilst, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede.

What can be more nobly pure than the character of this maiden? With what true modesty she sets aside the ignoble suspicions of her chastity which her brother had uttered! Critics have failed to see the art with which Shakespeare here delineates the self-conceited, shallow-principled character of Laertes, preparing us for the consummate treachery to which he deliberately lends himself at the end of the play. Surely, if this man had possessed one grain of true nobility of character, he must have taken his sister to his arms, or, not feeling himself worthy of such familiarity, must have knelt at her feet and thanked her for such a loving rebuke. What does he answer? In the true spirit of intolerant self-conceit he puts her sweet counsel aside with these arrogant and careless words—

LAER. O, fear me not.
I stay too long:

As he is going he reverts with astounding insensibility to his former speech:

LAER. Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well
What I have said to you.

Her answer is full of nothing but the tenderest humility:

OPH. 'Tis in my memory lock'd,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.

Now we come to the all-wise Polonius' advice to his daughter — the man who was fresh from bowing before an incestuous usurper:

POL. What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?
OPH. So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet.
POL. Marry, well bethought:
'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late
Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous:

If it be so—as so 'tis put on me,
And that in way of caution—I must tell you,
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you? give me up the truth.
OPH. He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me.
POL. Affection! pooh! you speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
OPH. I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
POL. Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a baby,
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly;
Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool.
OPH. My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honourable fashion.

The same sweet patience, the same heavenly humility, distinguishes all her answers, till, at last, tried beyond all bearing by the silly coarseness of her ridiculously self-complacent father, she looks up, and checks his ribaldry by a dignified vindication of her lover's conduct. It would seem that even the triple armour of Polonius' vanity was not proof against this; for he can only reply with a very commonplace observation, being a little checked in his flow of worldly-wise oratory:

POL. Ay, fashion you may call it; go to, go to.
OPH. And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
With almost all the holy vows of heaven.

Ophelia will not be stopped in her defence of her lover. To her the fact that Hamlet had used "almost all the holy vows of heaven" meant rather more than it did to the wise old counsellor who had taken the same oath of allegiance to Claudius, without the slightest scruple, as he had to the dead King, and that in spite of the suspicious circumstances of his old master's death, and the more than suspicious marriage of Claudius with his brother's widow. However, the plausible old proser has soon taken breath, and is off again, careering among his fine-sounding platitudes:

POL. Ay, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows; these blazes, daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,
Even in their promise, as it is a-making,
You must not take for fire. From this time
Be something scanter of your maiden presence;
Set your entreatments at a higher rate
Than a command to parley. For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him, that he is young,
And with a larger tether may he walk
Than may be given you: in few, Ophelia,
Do not believe his vows; for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,

Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,
The better to beguile. This is for all:
I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,
Have you so slander any moment leisure,
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to't, I charge you: come your ways.
OPH. I shall obey, my lord. [*Exeunt.*

No bitter word, no thought or threat of rebellion—he is her father, 'tedious old fool' though he be—and she knows nothing which can justify her disobedience to him.

The object of this scene seems to be this; to show how completely Hamlet's character was misunderstood by those who should have known him best, and how completely uncongenial must have been his surroundings at the Court of Denmark, even if the terrible events of the last two months had not taken place. The conventional standard of virtue which Polonius and Laertes held, and which was the only standard of right and wrong they knew, is here clearly expressed. What a contrast between their speeches and Hamlet's soliloquy in the former scene! what an irreconcilable antagonism between the son, whose heart and mind are both absorbed in his dead father, and these two, whose only thought is of their own pleasure and advancement, who cannot too soon forget their late benefactor that they may learn to flatter and win the favour of his treacherous successor! The next scene, in which we see Ophelia, is that in which she gives the well-known description of Hamlet's singular intrusion on her privacy in such a condition as to make her fear he was mad. It is not necessary to repeat her words here, as they have been given in the text;* I may remark that to reconcile such words with the idea of a maiden full of voluptuous ideas and impure desires, prepared to sacrifice her virginity if she has not already done so, is a task worthy of the ingenuity of a German critic.

Polonius does not seem quite so self-confident now, and begins to think that possibly after all Hamlet might have been something better than a fickle profligate, though he was a prince. (Act II., Scene 1, lines 101-110.)

POL. Come, go with me: I will go seek the King.
This is the very ecstasy of love;
Whose violent property fordoes itself
And leads the will to desperate undertakings
As oft as any passion under heaven
That does afflict our natures. I am sorry.
What, have you given him any hard words of late?
OPH. No, my good lord,† but, as you did command,

* See Pages 24-25.

† It may be noted that Laertes and Ophelia both address their father as 'my lord.' Ophelia uses the term in *every* speech of hers with only one exception. This may be attributed partly to the ceremonious custom of Shakespeare's time: but I am inclined to believe that it is also intended to show how formal and precise Polonius was towards his children, and that they looked upon him with no little awe.

I did repel his letters and denied
His access to me.

It is almost impossible to imagine these words to be spoken by one who had any consciousness of having compromised her virgin purity, or her woman's dignity, with her lover, either in thought or deed.

POL. That hath made him mad.
I am sorry that with better heed and judgment
I had not quoted him: I fear'd he did but trifle
And meant to wreck thee; but beshrew my jealousy!
By heaven, it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion. Come, go we to the king:
This must be known; which, being kept close, might move
More grief to hide than hate to utter love.
Come. [*Exeunt.*

The prudent father and all-wise counsellor has now entirely abandoned all suspicions of Hamlet's good faith. Though Ophelia says nothing, it may fairly be supposed that her face shows the joy which she feels at her father's change of sentiments; and that the hope of attaining the happiness, which she had dreamt of, in an union with the object of her love, sanctioned by her father and by his mother, springs up afresh in her heart. For this reason she may the more readily, in perfect good faith, lend herself to the deception which is afterwards practised on Hamlet.

When Polonius informs the King and Queen of the great discovery he has made as to the cause of Hamlet's madness, he says, speaking of the letter (Act II., Scene 2, lines 107 and 108), that Ophelia had given it him—"in her duty and obedience."

I have spoken of this letter (Appendix A, page 7) as presenting considerable difficulty, and the more one tries to ascertain its history, the more perplexing it becomes. Polonius makes no allusion to it in the scene from which I have already quoted (Act I., Scene 3) so that it is perhaps safest to suppose that, after the agitated account which she had given her father of Hamlet's strange conduct, he had asked her if she had any letters of his; that she had then given him this one, both for the reason which I have suggested before (Appendix A, page), namely, that there was nothing in it which she could object to show to others, and also because the strange tone of it would seem, in some measure, to confirm the supposition that Hamlet was mad. I do not believe that Polonius had, after his warning to Ophelia (Act I., Scene 3), required her to give up all Hamlet's letters, and that she had been guilty of the deceit of keeping back all save this one. It is a more probable conjecture that Ophelia, who was sincerely alarmed on Hamlet's account, and very much distressed, would say to her father that

she would rather he went alone to the King, as she could not bear the idea of being questioned about Hamlet; but that if her father wanted any proof of his love for her, he might take this letter; this seems to me the likeliest explanation of the way in which Polonius became possessed of it. But this does not help us to discover when it was written; whether before or after Polonius had forbidden his daughter to hold any communication with Hamlet (Act I., Scene 3, lines 133-135); I am inclined to think '*before*' (see Appendix A, page 8), the more so because the expression of Ophelia (Act II., Scene 1, line 109), 'I did repel his letters,' would seem to imply that she had refused to receive them. The chief object in reverting to this letter now is to illustrate the perfect sincerity of Ophelia's character; her first act of deceit was yet to come, and dearly did she pay for it.

From Polonius' own words immediately after reading the letter we see that Ophelia had treated him with filial confidence—

> This in obedience hath my daughter shown me;
> And more above, hath his solicitings,
> As they fell out by time, by means and place,
> All given to mine ear.

It is to be noted that both the King and Queen seem to place the most implicit trust in Ophelia's goodness; not a word is said by them implying any suspicion of her perfect modesty and truth. It may also be observed that, although at the beginning of this scene, when Claudius tells Gertrude that Polonius had found 'the source of Hamlet's distemper,' her reply is—

> I doubt it is no other but the main;
> His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage—

she is now inclined to believe Polonius' explanation, while Claudius seems to doubt it; he had a guilty self-consciousness which made him suspect the real cause; nor was he the sort of man to believe in a young Prince going mad for the sake of love. Gertrude had, doubtless, in happier times, been her son's confidant on the subject of his attachment, of which she certainly did not disapprove (see Act V., Scene 1, lines 232 and 233).

Polonius now discloses his plan, which is carried out in the next Act; the approach of Hamlet puts an end to all other discussion, and Polonius is left to try his skill on 'the poor wretch.'

Only one point need be mentioned as affecting the main question under discussion, and that is Hamlet's indelicate allusion to Ophelia (lines 185 and 186). This is evidently part of his affectation of madness. He says the very thing he would have been least likely to say in his own proper character, and what he never would have said if there had been any intrigue between him and Ophelia. Indeed this passage would suffice to convince me that the relations between the two had never been of a sensual character. As we find

that Hamlet generally uses his assumed madness as a cover for satire, there is little doubt but that he intends to ridicule Polonius for the extraordinary care he had taken of his daughter's virtue by forbidding her to hold any intercourse with him, conscious as he was that the thought of wounding her honour had never crossed his mind.

It is the next day that Ophelia, in company with her father, presents herself before the King and Queen to play her part in the notable scheme which was at once to discover the cause of, and to find a cure for, the supposed madness of Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were there, to report the result of their first day's work as spies; Ophelia, in her innocence, listens to every word they let fall with simple faith, and is chilled with despair, or flushed with hope, as their relation dwells upon the signs of a brooding melancholy he had shown, or upon the awakened interest which he had manifested at mention of the players. When the spaniels have gone, Claudius explains the plan of action; Hamlet has been 'sent for'—

> That he, as 'twere by accident, may here
> Affront Ophelia. (Act III., Scene 1, lines 30 and 31.)

The King and Polonius, 'lawful espials' (a phrase which might assist in removing any scruples Ophelia had to play her part in the deception), were to hide themselves in such a position that they might hear all which passed; the Queen was to go away. Her assent to this scheme is given in such terms as to show that her opinion of Ophelia was a very high one.

> QUEEN. I shall obey you:
> And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
> That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues
> Will bring him to his wonted way again,
> To both your honours.

Ophelia's answer is what a maiden's should be, simple and modest—

> Madam, I wish it may.

Polonius' directions to Ophelia are worth observing, as they are generally ignored on the stage.

> POL. Ophelia, walk you here. . . . . .
> . . . . . Read on this book;
> That show of such an exercise may colour
> Your loneliness.

The next words show that this book was one of devotion, and render more probable my conjecture that, towards the end of Hamlet's soliloquy, Ophelia has sunk on her knees and is really praying for her distracted lover (see Part I., page 27). I have quoted most of the scene in the text, but as far as it bears on the character of Ophelia, I may be allowed to revert to it. How touchingly simple are her words, even when she is playing a part, even when she is consciously lending her aid to a deception—but to one,

be it remembered, which she honestly believes to be an innocent one, and likely to lead to the restoration of her beloved Prince to his right mind, and of herself to that place in his heart which she once so proudly, so lovingly held.

Some persons, whose ingenious minds have despoiled Ophelia of her purity, profess to see in Hamlet's words—

> Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remember'd—

a confirmation of their opinion. I suppose they would paraphrase these words thus: "Sweet creature, I have done you the greatest wrong man can do to woman; don't forget me in your prayers!" Is this part of Hamlet's affected madness, or is he really out of his senses when he is supposed to utter such a piece of consummate cold-blooded hypocrisy? But this foul distortion of Hamlet's words may be left for those whose minds delight in feats of indelicate gymnastics.

Hamlet's words, as well as his manner, are such as to give Ophelia confidence; as I have pointed out in the text (Part I., page 27), she has not seen Hamlet for some time; she probably seeks to express her sorrow at their separation; and, with the sweet inconsistency of woman, to rebuke him tenderly for taking her 'denial' of 'his access' to her as serious, and for not making her disobey her father's commands. Hamlet's answer is somewhat formal—

> I humbly thank you: well, well, well.

*The repetition of the latter word three times is said to be part of his affectation of madness, one of the symptoms of insanity being the repetition of words; but I cannot think it is anything more than a natural accident of Hamlet's melancholy.

The step which Ophelia now takes, that of offering to give back to Hamlet the presents which he had made her, I have attributed in the text (Part I., page 27) to the instigation of her father; but it is quite possible that it was entirely her own idea, and that she hoped, by thus seeming to recognise formally the severance of all affectionate relations between them, to draw from Hamlet a renewal

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* See Staunton's Note. Illustrated edition, 1861, vol. iii., p. 366. "To us it is evident that here, as in other places, the iteration—a well-known symptom of intellectual derangement—is purposely adopted by Hamlet to encourage the belief of his insanity. He never indulges in this cuckoo-note unless with those whom he distrusts." (Note *a*, on the words, "Except my life, except my life, except my life"—Act II., Scene 2, lines 216-217.) That this iteration or repetition is "a well-known symptom of intellectual derangement," I am not so sure; it certainly is a common habit of men who are preoccupied with some great sorrow, or who are of a melancholy temperament. As to the other places in which Hamlet adopts this 'iteration,' except the one on which Mr. Staunton's note is written, and the present one in the scene with Ophelia, I can find no other but that in the scene with Osric (Act V., Scene 2, line 172)—"Yours, yours;" this is not exactly a similar instance. I think Mr. Staunton has been led to generalise here on insufficient grounds.

of those 'tenders of honourable affection,' those 'holy vows' to which she had before listened with such delight. But she is met by a blank denial on Hamlet's part, as if he had completely forgotten all the past; this rouses her to an earnest vindication of her own truthfulness, which is full of sweet maidenly dignity; she is not acting a part now, and she insists on returning the gifts of which the giver had so cruelly denied all knowledge. I have already carefully analysed this scene up to the point when Hamlet leaves her; it is only necessary to point out that except in the one falsehood which she is forced to tell, all that Ophelia utters in this trying crisis is distinguished by the purest simplicity and the most unselfish love. I cannot myself conceive any man in the possession of his senses, reading this scene, and especially the beautiful speech of Ophelia after Hamlet's exit, without feeling that he is in the presence of one of the noblest and purest creations of a poet, who has shown in the characters of the women with which he has adorned his plays, that he knew, what so many critics have never been able to conceive, the true 'beauty of holiness.' Let anyone ponder over this exquisite outburst of unselfish sorrow, and then say if she who uttered it was likely to have been unchaste or lascivious:

OPH. O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword:
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstacy: O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

Some feeling of respect for such noble grief might have restrained Polonius and the King from entering sooner; at any rate, no one will quarrel with the poet who kept them in the background, since their presence must have deprived us of one of the most beautiful passages to be found in Shakespeare.

It is to be noted that Ophelia's agitation does not permit of her speaking again. I take the expression of Polonius—

How now, Ophelia!

to be occasioned by the violence of the emotion which she strives in vain to hide. The next words should, then, be spoken kindly; for even the pragmatical Polonius must have been touched by her sorrow—

You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said;
We heard it all.

He wishes to spare her the pain of such a recital.

I come now to the examination of that part of the 'Play Scene'

which bears upon the character of Ophelia; and I must apologise for the unavoidable necessity of drawing attention to such passages as must be admitted to form a serious blemish in this otherwise noble work.

Between Scenes 1 and 2 of this Act there is an interval of some hours. When Hamlet parted from Ophelia it was morning; now it is night, and the promised play to which Hamlet has invited the King and Queen is going to be represented. Hamlet has determined to cover his serious purpose by the assumption of a more extravagant demeanour than ever; he has escaped with flying colours, as he considers, from the trap laid for him; he is conscious of having filled the King's mind with vague alarm, while he has succeeded in puzzling him more than ever as to the cause of his nephew's madness. Terribly anxious as to the result of that bold experiment which he is about to try, which must, if successful in betraying the King into an indirect confession of his guilt, at once confirm the solemn revelation made to him by his father's spirit, and leave him no excuse for delaying the fulfilment of 'that dread command,' Hamlet's nerves are strung to the highest pitch, and the eccentricities in which he indulges are but the safety-valves for an excitement which, if totally suppressed, might overpower his senses. His resentment against Ophelia for what he considers her duplicity towards him, which is still working in his mind, coupled with the mischievous pleasure he takes in misleading his uncle, induces him to take his place at her feet. From the first entry of the King, Queen, Polonius, Ophelia and the court, Hamlet has appeared to be in the highest spirits; when he answers to his mother's invitation to sit by her side—

No, good mother, here's metal more attractive—

at the same time approaching Ophelia with a gay air, it is natural that she should be alarmed at the change which has come over him since she last saw him. He commences in a tone of cruel banter—

Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Her answer is in a tone of outraged modesty, but simple as a maiden's should be. He continues in a manner which must have increased her alarm. The belief that he is mad enables her to suppress her indignation; the only resemblance of a reproach that escapes her lips is contained in that pathetic remonstrance—

You are merry, my lord.

The pleasure of having him near her overcomes her timidity, and she tries to seem at her ease with him. She asks him to explain the dumb show which precedes the play, but Hamlet's answer is so brutally filthy that even his assumed madness can be no excuse for such an outrage on decency.* Ophelia's gentle nature is roused to

* I should like to be able to prove that some of the most offensive lines were inserted by the players to suit the depraved taste of their audience,

some show of resentment; for a moment she turns away from him with the simple rebuke—

You are naught, you are naught: I'll mark the play.

But he does not leave her long to herself:

HAM. Is this is a prologue, or the posy of a ring?
OPH. 'Tis brief, my lord.
HAM. As woman's love.

This last sentence is spoken looking at the Queen, though undoubtedly Hamlet means it as a satire on the fickleness which he thinks Ophelia has shown towards him. His next observation, after the speech of the Player Queen, in which she vows fidelity to her husband's memory, ought not to be addressed to Ophelia (as it is according to the stage direction in Staunton's Edition), but should be spoken aloud at the Queen, on whom, as well as on Claudius, Hamlet's eyes are riveted.

In spite of the cruel insults he has addressed to her, which she excuses to herself on the ground of his distraction, Ophelia cannot refrain from the attempt to win one look of love or one tender word from Hamlet. But he is merciless; to her playful remark—

You are as good as a chorus, my lord—

he answers only with a morose sarcasm—

I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.

She cannot conceal her bitter pain; at any other time he must have felt stung by her reproach—

You are keen, my lord, you are keen.

But his intense excitement makes him like one under a demoniacal possession; his only answer is again a brutal insult: the last words she speaks are these somewhat enigmatical ones—

OPH. Still better, and worse.
HAM. So you must take your husbands.

Thus do these two, who once had been so happy in their mutual loves, virtually take leave of one another: he who was once so gentle and so affectionate to her, so full of tender and refined homage to her beauty and to her virtues, upon the "honey of whose music vows" her soul had rapturously fed—he will never more speak one word to her—no, not to tell her how harshly he had misjudged her, and to ask her forgiveness. She will hear nothing

but I am afraid that they must be acknowledged to have been permitted, if not approved, by Shakespeare, in common with some equally repulsive passages in other plays. I have no wish to see Shakespeare universally Bowdlerised, but I think the text, as published in the Clarendon Press Series, might be generally adopted for the purposes of the library. These objectionable passages were erased in Collier's annotated copy, and I believe they were very rarely spoken in representation, even during the seventeenth century.

more of him until she is told that her father died by his hand, and that he is sent away, half in pity, half in punishment, to a distant land; and he, what would he not give to recal these cruel taunts, these ferocious insults, which, in his half-assumed, half-real madness, he has now uttered, when he sees the body of his beloved being lowered into a dishonoured grave?

There is a terrible pathos in this love story of Hamlet and Ophelia, though Shakespeare has only permitted us to snatch a hasty glance at it.

Every word uttered by Ophelia in this scene seems to strengthen the view of her character which I have taken, and to render impossible, except in distorted natures, the slightest suspicion of her purity. Every impure allusion, every foul inuendo, which is aimed at her in this scene, seems to drop harmless from the armour of her spotless chastity. Compare for a moment the rich voluptuousness of Juliet, the reckless banter of Beatrice, the mischievous *double entendres* of Portia, with the crystal simplicity of Ophelia's language, and one cannot fail to see which is the purest creation. She is Shakespeare's most perfect portrait of virginity, as Desdemona and Imogen are his most faultless pictures of true wifehood.

It only remains now to examine the two scenes in which Ophelia is shown to us in her madness. I think I shall find no difficulty in proving that these do not afford the slightest ground for the more modified aspersions of Goethe, or of Gervinus, on her character, any more than for the direct accusation of unchastity.

I now proceed to Act IV., Scene 5, between which and the preceding scene it must not be forgotten that a considerable interval of time elapses. (See Additional Note 10.) I must, at the risk of being tedious, insist upon this fact, for unless the reader bears it in mind, he will not be able to follow much of my argument. During this interval of time Ophelia has heard the news of her father's death; at first the accounts were vague; then the fact that her lover had killed him would become known to her; next she would hear how, on this last most terrible proof of his madness, that lover had been sent away to England; she would then begin to realise these two facts—first, that Hamlet, for whom her heart yearned, in spite of his late cruel conduct to her,* had gone without being able, even had he so desired, to say one word of farewell; next that her father (for whom she had an affection reverential in the extreme, partaking much of awe, but still like every feeling of her sweet nature, most tender) had suffered a violent and sudden death at the hands of Hamlet; she might also have heard how the author of this deed of violence had wept over the victim of his rash fury; the motive which had caused this fatal mistake she could not know: her mind, already bewildered by the remembrance of his fantastic harshness and brutality towards her,

* During the representation of the play of Gonzago.

would have brooded over the calamities of which she might well consider herself the indirect cause—was it not Hamlet's love for her, so cruelly repulsed by her, acting under her father's command, which had driven him into this madness? Of the great crime from which all these woes had their origin she knew nothing; her brother was away, she had none to comfort her. Small wonder if her brain gave way under this load of misery. Gertrude has been too much occupied with the anxieties surrounding her and her husband to think of Ophelia; the stings of remorse have been roused to activity in her soul by the eloquent denunciations of her unhappy son; she shrinks from looking on the ruin of which her guilt has been the primal cause; her mind is racked by the vague but terrible apprehension of some new calamity. Horatio, for whom, as her son's trusted friend, she has great respect, has accompanied a Gentleman of the Court, who comes to announce that Ophelia, in a distracted state, seeks an interview with her:

QUEEN. I will not speak with her.
GENT. She is importunate, indeed distract:
Her mood will needs be pitied.
QUEEN. What would she have?
GENT. She speaks much of her father, says she hears
There's tricks i' the world, and hems and beats her heart,
Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

This description of Ophelia's state shows us clearly what was the cause of her madness, and on what subject her distracted mind dwelt most persistently. It is perfectly natural that she might have suspected some foul play on the part of the King, as the circumstances of Polonius' death were never explained to anyone but to Laertes; and even from him the real reason why Hamlet sought to kill the King, for whom he had mistaken Polonius, was carefully concealed.

Ophelia enters, as the Quarto 1603 has it, "*playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing;*" she asks—

Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?

referring, of course, to the Queen, who addresses her with a mixture of surprise and pity—

How now, Ophelia!

The distracted maiden immediately bursts into a song:

How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon.

Ophelia was not in love with a pilgrim; and the irrelevancy of the words are so obvious that the Queen may well ask, "What imports this song?" The next verse she sings is suggested by her father's death:

OPH. Say you, nay, pray you, mark.
(*Sings*) He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.
Oh, oh!

This is a cry of grief, so natural that the Queen thinks it may not be hopeless to try and reason with her:

QUEEN. Nay, but, Ophelia,—

She, however, continues the song—

OPH. Pray you, mark.
(*Sings*) White his shroud as the mountain snow,—
Enter KING.
QUEEN. Alas, look here, my lord.

Ophelia does not heed the interruption, but without looking up sings on—

Larded with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.

It is a striking feature in madness how the mind follows one clue of thought up to a certain point, and then drops it, changing suddenly to another; but the dominant idea which was the first cause of the aberration is sure to return. This verse ended, Ophelia lets the lute drop by her side, and from her answer to the King it is evident that her fancy has wandered on quite a new track:

KING. How do you, pretty lady?
OPH. Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!

This story of the baker's daughter was one she had probably been told in her childhood. The King's remark—

Conceit upon her father—

refers to the last verse she had sung. By a rapid transition she passes now into a merry vein, and taking up the lute again, sings the ballad which has occasioned such unfavourable views to be taken of her character. It is not necessary to quote it. The words with which she introduces it, I believe, ought to be spoken with an exaggerated gaiety—

Pray you, let's have no words of this; but when they ask you what it means, say you this:

I must take exception to any attempt, on the part of the actress, to give a pathetic turn to whatever portion she may choose to

sing of it. The contrast between this and the other verses Ophelia sings, which are all melancholy, and on the subject of death,* is meant to be most marked. As I have said in the text (Part I., page 26), I believe this ballad to have been one which had been sung by her nurse to Ophelia; it is just such a kind of composition as a person in that class of life would have sung. The character of the nurse in Romeo and Juliet, as drawn by Shakespeare, shows us that these good women were not over delicate as to the kind of jests with which they amused their young charges. Seeing that this ballad seems to have been recalled to her distraught mind by the tale about the baker's daughter being changed into an owl, just such a popular tale as a nurse would tell to a child, I think the explanation I have suggested is the most probable. That the ballad could by any means be supposed to refer to Ophelia's relations with Hamlet I cannot understand; it is not a tale of seduction by a man of a woman, but the story of a girl who, without any modesty, deliberately throws herself in the way of temptation. No one who has studied cases of mental alienation is ignorant of the fact that persons, when delirious, accuse themselves of crimes the very reverse of those to which their dispositions were prone. Sit by the side of a patient in delirium, and you will find their mind running on most trivial incidents, which they distort and exaggerate in their madness: if, as I have said, the brain has given way under some great sorrow, the dominant idea of that sorrow will return again and again, in different shapes, but substantially the same. In most cases, however, just as we dream, for the most part, of the least significant events in the past day, so do our minds, in delirium, generally run on matters which, in our senses, we should hardly remember.

It is also to be observed that Ophelia never says another word which could be tortured into any allusion to her having surrendered her virginity to Hamlet's solicitations, much less of her having had any sensual passion for him.

The merry mood of Ophelia does not last long, as her next speech, immediately after she has finished the ballad, shows. It is one of her most pathetic utterances:

> OPH. I hope all will be well. We must be patient: but I cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i' the cold ground. My brother shall know of it: and so I thank you for your good counsel.

She goes out, fancying, poor wretch! that she is leaving some festivity. In the interim between this and her next entrance she gathers the flowers with which she returns. These flowers she had evidently picked with the intention of decking her father's bier. Twice during this scene she breaks off suddenly the thread of her wanderings—first, when she says, "It is the false steward that stole

* Except the one line she sings of "Bonny sweet Robin is all my joy" (line 182).

his master's daughter;" next, when she bursts into the song "Bonny sweet Robin," of which she only sings one line.

As to the flowers which she gives to Laertes, to Gertrude, and to Claudius, I am at a loss to understand how Gervinus could ever have made such an utterly unwarrantable allusion to them as he has. Her "imagination infected with sensual images," "her quiet modesty inspired with amorous passions"—all this "is apparent in the songs she sings in her delirium, and in the *significant* flowers she distributes, as clearly as anything so hidden in its nature can and may be unveiled." I do not envy any man the pruriency of mind which can discover the justification of such a statement in the flowers which Ophelia distributes. Rosemary is for 'remembrance,' which she gives to Laertes, as well as pansies for 'thoughts;' there is no 'significance' in these, any more than in rue, in daisies, in violets, or in columbine, of anything but a pure nature. Fennel is said to be an emblem of 'lust,' but it was much more commonly used as significant of 'flattery,' in which sense it is undoubtedly used here. To the plausible Claudius 'fennel' was not an inappropriate gift. As I have already showed, there is only one song out of the four or five that Ophelia sings which contains any impure allusions. Such criticism as this of Gervinus reminds one of the story of the young lady, who was so refined that she declined to hold any more conversation with one who had been guilty of such indelicacy as to talk of "the naked eye."

The last song of Ophelia is one in which it would puzzle the luminous eye of a German critic to perceive any sensual image:

> And will a' not come again?
> And will a' not come again?
> No, no, he is dead,
> Go to thy death-bed,
> He never will come again.
>
> His beard was as white as snow,
> All flaxen was his poll:
> He is gone, he is gone,
> And we cast away moan:
> God ha' mercy on his soul!
>
> And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God be wi' you. [*Exit.*

With these words she departs, never having even recognised her brother. They are the last words for us she speaks; we see nothing more of this most gentle and pure creation of Shakespeare's genius, till we stand with her sorrowing brother and heart-broken lover by the side of her grave. Her 'virgin crants' are laid upon her body that had been the stainless temple of an unblemished soul. We read Laertes' beautiful words as something more than pity's homage to an unhappy fate; they are the just tribute to a purity which no breath of posthumous calumny can sully—

> And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
> May violets spring!—

Words which would indeed have been a mockery if spoken over the grave of Hamlet's concubine, and none the less a mockery, with due respect to Dr. Gervinus, if spoken over the body of one whose 'imagination had been infected with sensual images,' or whose modesty had been tainted with 'amorous passion.'

There is another circumstance which renders the theory that Hamlet had seduced Ophelia quite untenable. Neither Claudius nor Laertes in any way hint at the possibility of such a thing; but surely if this very strong ground of quarrel with Hamlet existed, Laertes would gladly have availed himself of such a fair justification of any vengeance he might choose to exact; and Claudius would not have failed to use such a powerful means of exasperating the anger of Laertes against Hamlet, if there had been the shadow of a suspicion that Ophelia had been dishonoured by the young prince. But however harsh or even cruel Hamlet's words to Ophelia may seem to us, and might have seemed to Claudius and her father, who overheard them, there was no doubt that he had never offered any real insult to her honour. The relations between them had been broken off by the positive commands of Polonius himself, and Laertes had, as we have seen, warned Ophelia against an intimacy which might end for her in disgrace; we cannot therefore conceive that any delicacy, or scruple as to the honour of his family, would have restrained Laertes from making the very most of any conduct on the part of Hamlet which might have sufficed to justify his, or his father's, warning to Ophelia. Nothing would have been so likely to alienate the sympathies of the people from Hamlet, as a plausible story to the effect that he had first seduced the daughter and then killed the father in a quarrel. But little as Claudius respected the truth, or readily as the chivalrous Laertes lent himself to an act of the blackest treachery, they both knew that such an accusation against Hamlet would never have been entertained by those who were at all acquainted with his character.

With regard to the criticisms on Ophelia which I have quoted above, I may remark that Gervinus, of his own individual self, seems to incline to a very just view of the relations between Hamlet and Ophelia. With the first part of his remarks no one could quarrel; but, unfortunately, he seems suddenly to have fallen under the spell of Goethe's enervating sensualism, and the result is the passage on which I have already commented. That Hamlet 'abandons' Ophelia to despair and insanity cannot fairly be said; Gervinus has fallen into this mistake through failing to observe the interval which elapses between Scene 4 and Scene 5 of Act IV.

"His conversation with her is equivocal, and not as Romeo, Bassanio, or even Proteus have spoken with their beloved ones." This seems to me a very grave misrepresentation. Shakespeare has not given us any of Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia before he assumed madness; we may only surmise from the first words he

speaks to her (Act III., Scene 1, lines 89-90) that, had his suspicions of being watched by the King not been excited, he would have talked to her with modesty and tender reverence. To judge of his usual conversation with her by the specimens we have in the Play Scene would be absurd; for there he is evidently exaggerating the insanity which he was avowedly counterfeiting. Ophelia's description of Hamlet's demeanour towards her (Act I., Scene 3) justifies us in supposing that he might compare favourably with Romeo and Bassanio as far as purity of heart goes; while to talk of him in the same breath as of that abject liar and traitor, Proteus, is an insult. In any case it would be gross injustice to attempt to infect Ophelia's nature with the coarse indecencies which Hamlet utters in his assumed character of a bitter-tongued madman. It would be more to the point to compare her language when sane with that of Juliet, Portia, and Julia; I do not think her purity would be dimmed by such a comparison.

With regard to Goethe's conceptions of Ophelia, it is to me one of the most unpleasant features in a work which is the most utterly disappointing I have ever read; and which I humbly venture to assert has been endowed with an exaggerated amount of merit by enthusiastic critics. "Wilhelm Meister" is a work written by one advanced in years, in which we find all the cynicism and selfishness of old age coupled with an amount of animal passion which youth alone could excuse. The gem of the work, Mignon, is marred by the intrusion of the same element with which Goethe seeks to taint Ophelia's character, and the grateful, loving, child dies in a paroxysm of sensual desire. But this is not the place for a criticism of "Wilhelm Meister." Few who have carefully read that work will deny that there runs through it a strong flavour of sensuousness if not of sensuality.

Let us examine the description of Ophelia which I have extracted. "Her whole existence flows in sweet and ripe sensation." This seems to be the description of a juicy peach. . . . . "Decorum, like the thin crape upon her bosom, cannot conceal the motions of her heart, but on the contrary, it betrays them." Here we have the key to the mystery. To Goethe's eyes Ophelia presented herself as a voluptuous girl, with richly-moulded form, the charms of which (for the benefit of elderly gentlemen with an eye for beauty) she was by no means chary of revealing. Her moral nature suited admirably with her physical. "Her imagination is engaged, her silent modesty breathes a sweet desire, and if the convenient goddess Opportunity should shake the tree, the fruit would quickly fall." That is to say, she was only chaste, because she had not been tempted to be otherwise.

It is quite consistent with this luscious conception of Goethe's that she should try to lull her excited appetites to rest with indecent ballads. But I should very much like to know what justification Goethe would have offered for this passage: "Have we not an inti-

mation from the very beginning of the play of the subject with which the thoughts of the maiden are engaged? She pursues her course in silent secrecy, but without being able wholly to conceal her wishes and her longings." I maintain that we have no such intimation; on the contrary, that every word Ophelia utters shows that she was a gem of modesty, who worshipped, with the purest and most unsensual love, a young prince of great intellect, refined accomplishments, and such a nobleness of character as might well attract something more than the animal desire of a less virtuous girl than Ophelia. I have no doubt Goethe's description may seem very poetical, not to say delicious, especially to those who are accustomed to look upon every maiden as chaste only by compulsion; but an Englishman, in whose ears Milton's glorious description of Chastity, the Queen of Virtues, is still ringing, may be excused for thanking Heaven that Shakespeare's Ophelia was not Goethe's.

One more passage, and I leave a question which it is painful to be compelled to argue. This is Goethe's description of Ophelia in her madness. "But at length when all self-control is at an end, and the secrets of her heart appear upon her tongue, that tongue betrays her, and in the innocence of her madness, *even in the presence of royalty*, she takes delight in the echo of her loose but dearly-loved songs of 'The Maiden whose Heart was Won,' 'The Maid who stole to meet the Youth,' and so forth."* I think the idea, expressed by the sentence which I have underlined, passes all other instances I know of—what some might call by a harsher name, but which may be more politely described as theinstincts of courtierdom.† Conceive the wretched, distracted maid that Shakespeare has represented, pausing to think whether she was in the august presence of royalty or not!

It matters little after this touch that the next sentence gives the

* The passage runs thus in Carlyle's translation:—

"But at last, when her self-command is altogether gone, when the secrets of her heart are hovering on her tongue, that tongue betrays her, and in the innocence of insanity, she solaces herself, unmindful of king or queen, with the echo of her loose and well-beloved song, *To-morrow is Saint Valentine's Day*, and *By Gis and by Saint Charity*." The titles given here are certainly recognisable as lines occurring in the songs in question, but those given in Mr. Boylan's translation fairly puzzled me, until I turned to the original and found that they were literal translations of the lines given by Goethe—"Vom Mädchen das gewonnen ward, vom Mädchen das zum Knaben schleicht, und so weiter." I suppose Goethe evolved these ballads from his inner consciousness.

† Carlyle's translation is the more correct. The words in the original are—"Und in der Unschuld des Wahnsinns ergetzt sie sich vor König und Königin an dem Nachklange ihrer geliebten losen lieder, &c." I hope I have not stretched these words beyond their legitimate meaning. It certainly seems to me that they may fairly be made to bear the construction put upon them; and that the omission of the article before 'König' and 'Königin' shows that Goethe intended to mark the fact that Ophelia enjoyed the echo of her loose songs before Claudius and Gertrude, not as individuals, but *as King and Queen*—a circumstance which Ophelia, in her condition, could not be expected to regard.

very false impression that Ophelia sang more than one indecent song in her madness, and that she did so with evident enjoyment. Such a distortion of what Shakespeare has written is on a piece with the whole libel on Ophelia, so lamentable as coming from a writer who was one of the first to grasp the inner meaning of Hamlet's character.

APPENDIX E.

ON THE SOLILOQUY—

"O, WHAT A ROGUE AND PEASANT SLAVE AM I."

THE first words of this soliloquy, "Now I am alone," sometimes omitted on the stage, give the key to the interpretation of this outburst—for such it is—and therefore a complete contrast to that passionate piece of calm, reflective self-communing on the question of suicide, which comes in the next Act.*

It is a well-known fact that in the Quarto of 1603 this soliloquy occurs after, and not before, the one beginning "To be, or not to be," which (together with the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia) is placed in that edition before his scene with Polonius, and that with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—in fact, the first words that Hamlet speaks after his interview with the Ghost are, "To be, or not to be." Some people prefer this arrangement, because they consider that it lends greater force to Hamlet's self-communings on the subject of suicide. Ernesto Rossi, the Italian actor, omits this soliloquy, "O, what a rogue, &c.," altogether, and substitutes for it, "To be, or not to be." This appears to me quite indefensible. Other representatives of Hamlet omit or mutilate this soliloquy; but whether they do it from modesty or presumption I cannot take upon me to decide.

Hamlet had longed to be alone from the moment that the strong emotion of the player, while reciting the speech about Hecuba, awoke in his conscience the pangs of self-reproach for the remissness which he had shown in fulfilling the solemn duty imposed on him, and suggested to him the idea of taking an important step towards the fulfilment of that duty. By a supernatural visitation he had been informed of his uncle's guilt, and directed to punish him; now he saw his way to obtaining a material proof of that guilt, which would make the punishment a task less repugnant to his over-scrupulous conscience. He wanted to be alone that he might give way to his self-reproach, and might at the same time arrange the plan which had occurred to him. For the moment he becomes a man of action; with few words he dismisses the

* I have referred to this contrast again in the text, *page* 39.

players, the tedious old courtier, and the two double-faced friends of whose insincerity he has convinced himself. It is with an enormous sense of relief that he exclaims—

Now I am alone.

The next words—

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!

should not, it seems to me, be spoken with calm self-contempt, but with a bitterness almost furious. Hamlet, as a prince and a man of courage and honesty, uses the most injurious expressions that he can find with which to reproach his own apathy and indolence. In speaking to himself of his own faults he spares no term, however opprobrious; and the indignation he feels against his own defects is too real to be uttered with anything but the most impassioned vehemence. As he recalls the emotion of the player, emphasising and amplifying every detail, his indignation gathers force; till it culminates in the eloquent contrast which he draws between the fictitious wrong which excited such emotion in the player, and the terribly real injury which failed to rouse himself, the son of a murdered father, and that father a king, to any action or even to any expression of indignation.

I have pointed out in the text how Hamlet virtually refutes himself; it is sufficient to remark here that the actor should not be deterred by the paltry fear of an anti-climax from abandoning himself thoroughly to the passion of the speech up to the words—

O, vengeance!

at which point Hamlet's better sense triumphs, and he regains his self-command.

The expression—

About, my brain!

has been commented on by Gervinus* and others, who point out that we should naturally expect "About my hands," or "arm." But I do not think it is really so significant of Hamlet's averseness to action as at first sight it appears; it is by an exertion of his brain, not of his arm, that he hopes to entrap Claudius into a virtual confession of his guilt. It seems to me that Shakespeare intended here to represent Hamlet as having been so transported by passion, that a few moments' rest was necessary before the effects of the excitement would allow of his mind resuming the idea which had been suggested to him during the actor's speech. The word "Hum" which we find in the text, seems to prove this. The actor might pause here, as if, for a moment, he had lost the clue to the plan which the next lines develope. So far from weakening the effect

* See foot-note, *page* 75.

of this speech, it is much increased by the change at this point to a calm but intense reflection. Hamlet's intellect has regained its sway. Nothing could be more clear and vigorous than the manner in which he sketches out his plan of action. At the words—

The spirit that I have seen, &c.,

and more markedly the line—

Out of my weakness and my melancholy,

a great opportunity occurs for the expression of that gentle sadness and pathetic self-distrust which are remarkable features in the complex character of Hamlet.

I cannot refrain here from referring to the new force given to the conclusion of this speech by Mr. Irving, the more particularly as his critics do not seem to have quite appreciated its full significance. He takes his tablets out of his pocket before speaking the words—

I'll have grounds
More relative than this.

The precise meaning of the word "this" and what it refers to never seemed very clear: but this action explains it. In the first Act, after the Ghost has left him, it will be remembered that Hamlet has written down in his tablets that Claudius was a villain.* These same tablets he holds now in his hand; in them he is going to put down some ideas for the speech which he intends to introduce into the play to be performed before Claudius, with the object of making—

his occulted guilt
. . . . itself unkennel . . . . .
(Act III., Scene 2, lines 75 and 76.)

Can there be any more natural action than this, that he should touch these tablets with the other hand while he says—

I'll have grounds
More relative than this.

i.e., "than this record of my uncle's guilt which I made after the interview with my father's spirit?"

It is astonishing that the significance of Mr. Irving's action in bringing out his tablets before these words seems to have escaped all the critics. The fact is that the greater part of the soliloquy in the first Act, from which I have quoted, has generally been omitted by the representatives of Hamlet, so that the critics had been accustomed to pay little attention to it. Mr. Irving spoke it in its entirety, and did not forget that he had spoken

* See Appendix C.

it. It is on such minute points as this that a true artist does not neglect to bestow thought; with such an one every movement and gesture has its meaning, and is the result of a prolonged study of the character he is enacting; such painstaking must often be its own reward, for the audience of a theatre, as a rule, do not think at all of the entirety either of the play or of the characters, but look more at particular scenes and speeches, in which they are accustomed to see certain effects produced without any regard to the harmony of the whole conception.

Appendix F.

On the Soliloquy "To be or not to be."

This soliloquy has suffered, more than any other in the play, from the treatment it has received at the hands of the actors. Happily the old-fashioned Hamlet (whose oppressively gloomy appearance was enough to give one an indigestion), stalking down to the footlights with his arms folded, solemnly wagging his plume-laden head (which reminded one not a little of undertakers and hearses), and after more than a decent pause, delivering the well-known soliloquy in a sepulchral voice—happily this portentous ornament of the stage is rapidly becoming merely a nightmare of one's boyhood. But there is still much to be desired in the "Hamlet" of most leading actors with regard to this soliloquy, which demands the most natural ease and studied unconventionality in its delivery. The audience should be made to feel that they really are watching the workings of a human mind crushed under the burden of a life from which all joy, and hope, and peace, have departed; of one tempted to seize the terribly easy escape from such a life which self-destruction offers. The self-consciousness of the actor must be sternly suppressed; indeed, I should strongly advise his passing the interval between Acts II. and III. in perfect quiet, alone in his room, trying to bring his mind into as close sympathy as possible with that of Hamlet's; so that when he steps on the scene he may wear a pre-occupied and solemn air, as if he had really been debating with himself this awful question. We do not require a superficial and ponderous gloominess, but a tender, thoughtful melancholy, both in the expression of the face and in the carriage of the body. Weary and sad, Hamlet sinks into a chair; then, leaning his face on his hand, he seems trying to pierce with his eyes the veil which divides us from the unseen world.

At the first utterance of the words "To die," he pauses, as if he were asking himself what death really was; then he continues, in

a less solemn tone, as if his mind had been relieved of a great burden by the answer which his self-communing had suggested:

> To sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd.

The picture he draws is of something too happy to be easily realised. He feels that such a peaceful escape from all the troubles which harass our minds, and wound our hearts, in this world cannot be so easy or complete as it seems. Then he repeats, as if once more seeking to find the real meaning of the awful words, "To die," putting in juxtaposition the synonym he has chosen for them, "to sleep;" then—as if his mind had only just awakened to the full meaning of sleep—he repeats in a solemn tone, "to sleep:" sleep after all is not the perfect oblivion and peace that we love to believe it is—

> Perchance to dream:

He has found out the reason for that awe with which we approach the idea of death, the source of the mysterious power which makes us withhold our hand when one blow might seem to promise escape from all our sufferings.

> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> *Must* give us pause.

Note the contrast between the "may" and the "must;" the mere possibility that we shall dream during the sleep of death is so tremendous, that it cannot but check the readiness with which the grief-laden sufferer would fain free his soul from her prison-house.

> There's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.

(The word "*long*" should be emphasized.) Hamlet starts up from his reverie; for this doubt, at least—the hesitation which paralyses his action on this point, holding him back from that practical escape from his troubles which suicide seems to offer—this much at least of his weakness is explained to his perfect justification. He enumerates in forcible, picturesque, language the many sorrows and torments which life has for all of us; and his reason is assured that no one would spare that one thrust of the dagger which might at once end these sorrows, if death were not but the threshold of a new life, the possibilities and capabilities of which are hidden entirely from that same Reason's eye. Of that blessed security which the eye of Faith alone can behold beyond the darkness of death, Hamlet says not a word; he is debating the question of suicide from the merely philosophical point of view; his religious conscience was well aware that the peace and joy, from which Christianity knows that Death divides us, can be reached only by those who patiently await the summons; we may not invade the haven of rest; it is

only when the good ship has bravely battled against the storms, has done the work on the great ocean of life appointed her to do, that she may enjoy such a peaceful refuge.

It is remarkable that all the sophistry of the ancients is completely annihilated in this purely rationalistic speech; and it is impossible to rate too highly the skill and power with which Shakespeare has here confuted the most enlightened heathenism from the exact standpoint of an enlightened heathen. The slightest allusion to the beliefs of Christianity, the employment of any Christian expression, would have marred all.

There are several verbal expressions in this soliloquy which are worthy of comment. The simile of taking arms "against a sea of troubles" has often been brought forward as an instance of Shakespeare's carelessness and confusion of images. But I do not think the two emendations of Theobald, "a siege" and "the assay," are required. The sense is perfectly clear, and the idea of multitude is conveyed better by "a sea" than by "a siege." The common expression "a sea of faces" will occur to everybody in connection with this passage. "Slings and arrows" certainly suggest "siege" rather than "sea," and justify the adoption of Theobald's conjecture by those whose minds are troubled by the inaccuracy of the metaphor. It may be as well to note that the words "quietus" * and "sicklied" are not found in any other passage of Shakespeare's plays. "Bodkin," † in the sense of a dagger, seems to belong more to Chaucer's than to Shakespeare's language. "To grunt" occurs only in "Midsummer Night's Dream," Act III., Scene 1, where it is used in its more proper sense of the noise made by a hog; here it means "to groan," and there seems no reason why Shakespeare should not have employed the more elegant word. These and other verbal peculiarities of this soliloquy incline us to believe that Shakespeare founded it on some passage in an early-printed work which he had come across in the course of his miscellaneous readings: the similarities pointed out between Hamlet's words here and the book entitled "Cardanus' Comforte" may not be very strong, but they are sufficiently remarkable to justify the conjecture that Shakespeare had that work in his mind when writing this speech. (*See* Hunter's "Illustrations," vol. ii., pages 243 and 244.) I do not despair of yet finding some other passage in old English literature

* "*Quietus*" occurs in the Sonnets (cxxvi.). It is a purely legal term, and was no doubt suggested by "the law's delay." (*See* Hunter's "Illustrations," vol. ii., page 241.) The Italians still write "per quietanza" in giving the receipt for a bill.

† I am very much inclined to agree with Hunter, that "bodkin" here does not mean dagger, but a woman's bodkin, or perhaps a "writing-steel," or "stylus." (See the passage quoted in Richardson's Dictionary *sub* "Bodkin," from Holland's translation of Suetonius—"doe nothing else but catch flies, and with the sharp point of a bodkin or writing-steel prick them through.") I think there is no doubt that Hamlet wishes to mention the most contemptible instrument which could take away life.

which may have suggested to Shakespeare the train of reasoning as well as some of the more peculiar expressions here employed.

How very different was the original conception of this remarkable soliloquy may be seen by comparing the text of the Quarto (1603) with that of the play in its present shape. Of the different position which it occupies in the play I have already spoken: but that is comparatively unimportant; not so the very different treatment of the subject shown in this passage:—

> For in that dreame of death, when wee awake
> And borne before an everlasting judge,
> From whence no passenger ever return'd,
> The undiscovered country, at whose sight
> The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.
> But for this, the joyful hope of this,
> Whol'd bear the scornes and flattery of the world, &c. &c.
> * * * * * * * who would this indure,
> But for a hope of something after death.

Here it is not the *dread* of "something after death," but the joyful hope of it, which makes a man bear the ills of life rather than escape from them by self-destruction. The difference is very remarkable.

Appendix G.

ON THE PLAY SCENE.

It was probably intended by Shakespeare that Hamlet should burst out into snatches of song; but as many representatives of the character may not be able to sing, it would not do to insist on this point. It is more important to note that the state of Hamlet's mind is here almost precisely similar to what it was at the end of Act I. after his interview with the Ghost. Then his first vague suspicion of his uncle's guilt had been confirmed by the supernatural evidence of his father's spirit; now it has been rendered a positive certainty by the natural evidence of a guilty conscience, which Claudius has displayed when witnessing the mimic representation of the crime which he had committed. On both occasions the tension of Hamlet's nerves is so great that the excitement of his brain reaches almost to the verge of madness. It is a great pity that here, as at the end of the Act I., no representative of Hamlet on the stage venturcs to speak the words as they are set down; some omit one portion, some another, while Signor Salvini gets rid of the difficulty by omitting all,* and simply falling on

* Mr. Irving speaks only the lines beginning "For thou dost know, O Damon dear," &c., giving a new force to the word "pajock" or "peacock," which Hamlet substitutes for the manifest rhyme "ass" by looking at the fan of peacock's feathers which he had borrowed from Ophelia, and held in his hand during the representation of the play, as if that had suggested to him the substitution.

Horatio's neck. The subtlety with which Shakespeare has here portrayed the rapid transitions which characterise nervous excitement in a nature like that of Hamlet's is much obscured and weakened by any omission. Mark the words which follow those given in the text :—

Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?

How strongly they display that childish exultation at the success of his scheme, which I have elsewhere noticed as so characteristic of Hamlet. Horatio falls into his humour, and answers :—

Half a share ;

to which Hamlet rejoins—

A whole one, I ;

and then, putting one hand on Horatio's shoulder, bursts out into the verse :—

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself ; and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock.

HOR. You might have rhymed.

Hamlet now becomes for a moment more serious :

O good Horatio, I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive ?

HOR. Very well, my lord.
HAM. Upon the talk of the poisoning ?
HOR. I did very well note him.

Then, as if he did not dare to allow his mind to dwell upon the subject, Hamlet cries out—

Ah, ha ! Come, some music ! come, the recorders !
For if the King like not the comedy,
Why then, belike, he likes it not, perdy.
Come, some music !

This seeking the distraction of music is very remarkable, and tends to support the theory of those who hold that at this point Hamlet is virtually mad. I do not myself go so far as that, but it is certain that he here feels the strain upon his mind greater than he can bear, and that no one is more acutely sensible, than he himself is, how near he is to that boundary which separates excitement from insanity.

What I have said above as to the conduct of actors in this scene does not apply either to Mr. Irving or to Signor Salvini, but generally, when represented on the stage, Shakespeare's meaning seems to me so much obscured, that I have ventured to insert here some stage directions derived from a careful study of the text, which may facilitate a student of "Hamlet" in understanding the meaning of

the speeches here set down for him. There are two objects which Hamlet has especially in view—the first is to seem to be in very high spirits, the next is, under cover of assumed gaiety, to watch most closely the demeanour of Claudius. When the King, Queen, and Court enter, they come prepared to witness an entertainment especially provided for them by Hamlet; the very fact that he should have turned his attention to such a subject has naturally caused much delight to his uncle and to his mother; to the former, because it seemed to relieve him from the vague fear that his nephew's brooding melancholy arose from his suspecting the true cause of his father's death; to the latter, because, with all her faults, she loved her son, and was glad of his taking pleasure in anything.

Hamlet avails himself of his privileges, as a supposed madman, to a considerable extent, making his apparently gay sallies of humour as bitter as possible to the feelings of those to whom they were addressed; but the actor should beware of allowing this bitterness to affect the tone of his voice—for instance, the speech to Ophelia—

What should a man do but be merry? for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours—

should be uttered with perfect unconsciousness, as well as the following one; in fact, he should display an exaggerated levity, in which the exaggeration should be just sufficiently marked to show that it is the cloak which he purposely assumes to conceal his nervous agitation. Again, the words—

As woman's love—

should be spoken in a light tone of satire, with a rapid glance at Ophelia, which is instantly diverted to the stage, on which the Players now appear.

It has always been the custom for the representative of Hamlet to hold something in his hand, with which to conceal the workings of his countenance as he watches the King; generally the actor takes Ophelia's fan; but I think Fechter and Salvini are right in substituting a manuscript, supposed to contain the speeches as altered and added to by Hamlet. It is to be noted that Hamlet does not interrupt the Players for some time, except with the one exclamation—

Wormwood, wormwood.

Shakespeare has, like a true artist, given time for the mimic representation to work upon the conscience of Claudius, whose attention, at first carelessly bestowed upon the Players, grows absorbed as he gradually perceives the drift of what they are representing. The force of this scene would be much increased if the actor who plays the part of Claudius would observe more carefully this subtle touch of Shakespeare's, and would pass gradually from unforced gaiety at the beginning of the scene to indifference assumed

with effort, and finally, to agitation which he can no longer conceal. After the exit of the Player Queen, Hamlet turns to his mother; with an affectation of easy politeness he asks her—

> Madam, how like you this play?
> QUEEN. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.
> HAM. O, but she'll keep her word.

In saying this he turns away from the Queen and looks at Claudius, who has recovered self-possession enough to trust himself to speak.

> KING. Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?
> HAM. No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world.

This is said with light irony. The King, mastering his agitation, asks with assumed indifference—

> KING. What do you call the play?
> HAM. The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the duke's name; his wife, Baptista: you shall see anon; 'tis a knavish piece of work: but what o' that? your Majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not: let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.

I have often heard this speech spoken with far too manifest intention; it seems to me that Hamlet is anxious rather to remove any suspicion of his real purpose in causing this play to be represented: it is with great difficulty that he restrains himself, but he does do so, remembering that the representation of his father's murder, on which he mainly relied in his attempt to make the occulted guilt of Claudius unkennel itself, was yet to come. The murderer now enters on the scene; Hamlet announces his name—

> This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king.
> OPH. You are as good as a chorus, my lord.
> HAM. I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.

In speaking this line Hamlet should not look at Ophelia, but keep his eyes on the Player. We are coming now to the most important speech which he had inserted, and he is feverishly anxious that the actor should speak the speech correctly:

> Begin, murderer, leave thy damnable faces, and begin. Come: "The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge."

It is with the greatest difficulty that he now represses his excitement, and is obliged to give himself the vent of exaggerated language. During the speech of Lucianus, who is in the act of pouring the poison into the sleeper's ear, he watches the King's face with the most intense eagerness. The next speech is the one to the ordinary interpretation of which I have so strongly objected:—

> HAM. He poisons him i' the garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago: the story is extant, and written in very choice Italian: you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

It seems to me that the excitement of Hamlet should be here violently suppressed, and that he should not give way to it until the King and Court have all left. Claudius does not rise till the end of this speech, and for a moment he is unable to speak. The Queen evidently thinks that he is going to swoon, which very likely was not far from the truth; but he recovers himself by a great effort, and, calling for lights, hurries away: now Hamlet can let loose his pent-up excitement, which he does in the lines on which I have already commented at the beginning of this Appendix.

APPENDIX H.

ON THE SOLILOQUY, "NOW MIGHT I DO IT PAT," ETC.

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
And now I'll do't: and so he goes to heaven:
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No.
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

I give here the words of this soliloquy as I have not given them in the text. It is very interesting to compare this scene carefully with the version given of it in the first Quarto (1603), in which it stands thus:*

Enter the KING.

KING. O that this wet that falles vpon my face
Would wash the crime cleere from my conscience!
When I looke vp to heaven, I see my trespasse,
The earth doth still crie out vpon my fact,
Pay me the murder of a brother and a king,
And the adulterous fault I haue committed:
O these are sinnes that are vnpardonable:
Why say thy sinnes were blacker then is ieat,
Yet may contrition make them as white as snowe:

* See Allen's Reprint of "The Devonshire Hamlets" (i., pp. 58, 59). London: Sampson and Low, 1860.

I but still to perseuer in a sinne,
It is an act gainst the vniuersall power,
Most wretched man, stoope, bend thee to thy prayer,
Aske grace of heauen to keepe thee from despaire.
(*He kneeles. Enters* HAMLET.)

HAM. I so, come forth and worke thy last,
And thus hee dies: and so am I revenged:
No, not so: he tooke my father sleeping, his sins brim full,
And how his soule stoode to the state of heauen
Who knowes, saue the immortall powres,
And shall I kill him now,
When he is purging of his soule?
Making his way for heauen, this is a benefit,
And not reuenge: no, get thee vp agen,
When hee's at game swaring, taking his carowse, drinking drunke,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
Or at some act that hath no relish
Of saluation in't, then trip him
That his heeles may kicke at heauen,
And fall as lowe as hel: my mother stayes,
This phisicke but prolongs thy weary dayes. [*Exit* HAM.

KING. My wordes fly vp, my sinnes remaine below.
No King on earth is safe, if Gods his foe. [*Exit* KING.

If Shakespeare founded his "Hamlet" on an older play with the same title or treating of the same subject, I think that in this scene we have a very decided instance of the influence of the older work. The elaborate ferocity of this speech of Hamlet's is more in "King Cambyses" vein; it reminds me more of King Hieronimo than any other passage in Shakespeare's works.* True it is that in "Othello" we find almost as great ferocity of revenge, but there it is more in place, both as regards the character and nationality of Othello, no less than the subject of the tragedy; on Hamlet's lips such language seems forced and unnatural; indeed, its only justification is that it is intended to be so.

If we suppose that the Quarto of 1603 was not a mutilated version, but a rude transcript of the play as acted (in fact, a careless duplicate of the Prompter's copy), and that it contains much more of the older play unaltered than Shakespeare afterwards thought fit to retain, how we must wonder at the exquisite transformation which the first rude outline of the King's speech has undergone—into what a luminous and majestic form is the dark and flimsy shadow expanded!

The King's speech in the earlier version ends with a rhymed couplet, this would seem to point to an older play as the source whence it was borrowed; so in the final couplet of the scene, in which Shakespeare has retained the rhyme, though he has altered the language with great effect. The original is bald and commonplace—

My wordes fly vp, my sinnes remaine below.
No King on earth is safe, if God's his foe.

* I do not include that revolting play "Titus Andronicus" among Shakespeare's works; he may have touched it, but not enough to wash away its original brutality, much less to claim it as his own.

How much more forcible and poetical is Shakespeare's *finished* version—

> My words fly up, my thoughts remain below :
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

The last line is a most beautiful and true thought elegantly and succinctly expressed. It would be out of place here to enter on the question as to how far we are enabled to form any idea of Shakespeare's mode of working, by carefully comparing the comparatively meagre version of the Quarto 1603 with the more elaborate, and avowedly authentic, copy of 1604; but I have no doubt that a patient analysis of the two versions will yield the most important results.*

I must now return to the consideration of Hamlet's soliloquy. From the version in the Quarto 1603 it is evident that Hamlet is intended either to enter with his sword drawn or to draw it immediately he sees the King; in the speech, as it stands now, the sword should not be drawn till the words—

> And now I'll do't :

It was, therefore, I think, an unnecessary exercise of ingenuity on the part of Mr. Collier's "Old Corrector" to insert the stage direction "his sword drawn." Mr. Collier adds—"ready to kill the King if his resolution had held;" but Hamlet had made no resolution to kill the King at this moment; on the contrary, he was on his way to his mother's closet, and comes upon the King unexpectedly. Ernesto Rossi's entrance in this scene is more effective than that of either Salvini or Irving. He enters with his head down, as if deep in thought, revolving in his mind what he should say to his mother that might rouse her to a sense of her guilt; on seeing the King he starts and draws back; then the idea of killing the kneeling man strikes him suddenly, and he speaks the first line—

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying ;

It is evidently the mention of the word "praying" which causes Hamlet to pause; the meaning of the first line I take to be "Now might I do it at once, now he is on his knees unable to defend himself, and so absorbed in his prayers that he is not even aware of my presence." Hamlet continues, drawing his sword—

> And now I'll do't :

making a step towards the King at the same time; then the sight of the kneeling figure and the associations of the word "praying," which he cannot forget, make him pause. What Hamlet really felt, but what he would not admit to himself that he did feel, was

* I may perhaps mention that I have had the Quarto 1603 collated with the text of the complete "Hamlet" *verbatim* and *literatim;* and that I hope to be able to publish the results of the analysis I have made of the differences between the two, which are much more important than is usually supposed.

shame at the idea of killing a man so defenceless, and so occupied, as Claudius then was. Even to men less religious than Hamlet was, there is a kind of awe which, insensibly perhaps, associates itself with any one engaged in devotion; at that moment the most violent rage and hatred may well pause before striking their victim.

Hamlet is throughout this speech playing a part; the feeling is not real, it is forced, and therefore the strained, exaggerated, language is justifiable. I do not mean to say that Hamlet does not hate Claudius, but he does not really feel the malignant vindictiveness which his language expresses; he is trying to deceive himself, and, it may be, like some of us who try to accomplish that end, he half succeeds; he may half believe at the end of this ferocious soliloquy that he has spared the life of Claudius, not because his nature shrank from what would really have been an act of cowardly assassination, but because his vengeance was so fiendish that he sought to kill the soul, as well as the body, of his father's murderer. The words—

and so he goes to heaven:

are uttered after a pause, as I have said above; a pause during which Hamlet may have caught sight of the effects of his proposed act of vengeance, not only on his victim's soul, but on his own; the corollary to this proposition, which may have passed through his head, is "and I (go) to hell." But though his actions may betray his doubts as to his right to exact, by his own individual act, a life for a life, or as to the justice of the principle that one murder can justify another, his words, spoken to himself, must contain no such admission. The Ghost's accusation has been confirmed by strong indirect evidence; and the vengeance enjoined on him must be executed—but not at this moment. It is remarkable, if my theory of this speech be true, that Shakespeare has elaborated the plausible, if detestable, arguments by which Hamlet escapes from the necessity of immediately killing Claudius. It may be said that the dramatist only wanted to prolong his play, but I think, even if that were his purpose, he would try and reach it by means not inconsistent with the psychological problem which he has set himself in the character of his hero.

The whole argument on which Hamlet proceeds to abstain from action is ridiculously false—it is based upon the barbarous assumption (quite consistent with the rude and vague religion which Hamlet seems to profess) that any man, however wicked his life may have been, if killed in the act of prayer, whether he be praying from his heart or no, must go to heaven; while a man whose life has been noble and pure, if killed after eating, without preparation, through no fault of his own, must go to hell. This is simply the meanest superstition. A Catholic is bound to believe that any person dying in mortal sin is in danger of eternal damnation; also that any sinner truly penitent, who dies fortified by the rites of the Church, after severe contrition for and *full confession*

of his crimes, will, by the mercy of God, obtain everlasting happiness: but the sentence may, in the first case, according to the strictest Catholic doctrine, be remitted by the same mercy that is extended to the latter case; moreover, of the sincerity of the contrition God alone can judge. The priest must (to a certain extent) take it for granted that the penitent is sincere in his sorrow, no less than that he is honest in his confession. However, it is not just to expect from any dramatic poet accuracy on such a subject. The belief which Hamlet here virtually professes was quite general enough among semi-barbarous Christians, even in Shakespeare's own time, to justify its employment, as a motive, in Hamlet's case.

The language used by Hamlet in this passage with regard to his father is inconsistent with all that we are told of the elder Hamlet's character elsewhere, and at direct variance with the tone in which his son speaks of him on other occasions.

> He took my father grossly, full of bread,*
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
> And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?

I cannot see any justification of these words in anything that we are told in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" about the murdered King; they can only be explained on the theory I have ventured to lay down, that all the language of this speech is wilful exaggeration on the part of the poet.

The expression—

> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,

recalls very forcibly some of those painfully realistic representations of the torments of the damned, which are to be found in various illustrated books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As I have hinted in the text, the real explanation of Hamlet's conduct may be found in the words—

> My mother stays:

His interview with his mother was the subject on which his mind was really intent.

The last line should be spoken with bitterness, no doubt, but surely not with that air of mocking banter with which Salvini

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* Malone has pointed out that this singular expression is derived from Ezekiel xvi. 49: "This was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom; pride, fulness of bread." In this scene there is another obvious reference to Scripture in the King's speech:

> Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
> To wash it white as snow?

Perhaps to Psalm li. 7 (*see* "Clarendon" Hamlet, p. 183); but from the passage in the Quarto 1603—

> Why say thy sinnes were blacker then is ieat,
> Yet may contrition make them white as snow--

I should say the reference was to Isaiah i. 18: "Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow," &c.

spoke it. Of the three representatives of Hamlet, Irving, Salvini, and Ernesto Rossi (who alone of those that I have seen give this speech), Rossi is the only one that, as far as my judgment goes, produces any effect in it. With Irving it fell undeniably flat, and little less so with Salvini; but the measure of success that Rossi obtains in it does not, to my mind, justify its delivery. Explain it how you may, the speech is odious, and I do not see that it is necessary on the stage when some portion of the text, at any rate, must be omitted. If the virtue of selection is to be exercised, I should think this the very first speech that might be selected for omission.

The beautiful soliloquy beginning—

How all occasions do inform against me,

is ruthlessly sacrificed by all these three great actors.* If one is to choose between the two, I do not think there ought to be any hesitation either on the part of actor or of audience.

Appendix K.

On the two pictures in the closet scene.

The question as to how the two pictures alluded to by Hamlet in the speech beginning—

Look here upon this picture, and on this—

should be represented on the stage has given rise to much discussion, and to the most ingenious conjectures. The fact that both Mr. Irving and Signor Salvini, the two greatest representatives of Hamlet we have lately seen, have treated this passage as if the pictures existed only in the imagination of Hamlet, has inclined many persons, including some of our best critics, to adopt this view without, as it seems to me, sufficient consideration.

I propose to give as complete an account as I can of the various ways in which these two pictures have been arranged by different actors in the part of Hamlet, and then to examine, by the light of such evidence as the text presents, what Shakespeare's intention probably was.

Of the "business" (to use a technical term) of Burbage and Taylor in this scene we have no account; the following passage in Davies' "Dramatic Miscellanies" probably embodies the earliest

* Salvini gives a few lines of it—but without any of the circumstances (such as the passage of Fortinbras and his army) which occasion it: and the mutilated version he gives of it is quite unintelligible.

authentic information that we have as to the way in which the two pictures were represented (vol. iii., pages 106, 107):—

"It has been the constant practice of the stage, ever since the Restoration, for Hamlet, in this scene, to produce from his pocket two pictures in little, of his father and uncle, not much bigger than two large coins or medallions. How the graceful attitude of a man could be given in a miniature I cannot conceive.—In the infancy of the stage, we know that our theatres had no moving scenes; nor were they acquainted with them till Betterton brought some from Paris, 1662.—In our author's time they made use of tapestry; and the figures in tapestry might be of service to the action of the player in the scene between Hamlet and the Queen. 'But,' says Downs, 'Sir William Davenant taught the players the representation of Hamlet as he had seen it before the civil wars.' But, if the scantiness of decorations compelled the old actors to have recourse to miniature pictures, why should the playhouse continue the practice when it is no longer necessary; and when the scene might be shown to more advantage by two portraits, at length, in different panels of the Queen's closet? Dr. Armstrong, in his sketches, long ago pointed out the supposed absurdity of these hand-pictures. The other mode, of large portraits, would add to the graceful action of the player, in pointing at the figures in the wainscot. He might resume the chair immediately after he had done with the subject, and go on with the expostulation. However, this is only a conjecture which I throw out for the consideration of the actors."

It will be observed that Davies does not actually say that Betterton himself used the miniatures, though he implies it. In the accounts which Colley Cibber and Steele have left us of that great actor, in the part of Hamlet, there is no information on this point. Steevens' Note is as follows:—

"It is evident from the following words,—

'A *station*, like the herald Mercury,' &c.

that these pictures, which are introduced as miniatures on the stage, were meant for whole lengths, being part of the furniture of the Queen's closet;

'—— like Maia's son he stood,
'And shook his plumes.'
—'Paradise Lost,' Book V.

Hamlet, who, in a former scene, had censured those who gave, 'forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece' for his uncle's 'picture in little,' would hardly have condescended to carry such a thing in his pocket."

To which Malone adds (vol. vii., pages 391, 392, edit. 1811):

"The introduction of miniatures in this place appears to be a modern innovation. A print prefixed to Rowe's edition of 'Hamlet,' published in 1709, proves this. There the two royal portraits are exhibited as half-lengths, hanging in the Queen's closet; and either thus, or as whole lengths, they probably were exhibited from the time of the original performance of this tragedy to the death of Betterton. To half-lengths, however, the same objection lies, as to miniatures."

I may add that of this edition (1709) I had a copy, and that the pictures were there represented as hung on different sides of the stage; but I do not know that such illustrations are to be taken as very accurate. Seymour, in his "Remarks," is strongly against the miniatures, and in favour of full-length portraits (vol. ii., page 185):

"It is, I think, an egregious misconception, and a wretched device to make Hamlet come prepared with a couple of miniature pictures, for the purpose of expressing his reproaches at the Queen's conduct, and to utter these reproaches while he is seated on a chair:—the pictures pointed at are, surely, the portraits at length of the late king and of the usurper, the latter, Gertrude might naturally enough have introduced into her closet, while prudence and decency still retained the former there: and this representation would materially improve the action of the scene."

He quotes Lord Chedworth*:—

"These pictures should, certainly, be whole lengths, hanging in the Queen's closet."

In Hunter's "New Illustrations of Shakspeare" there is the following note (vol. ii., pages 256, 257):—

"It appears from the notes that when this play is represented two miniatures are produced by the actor, but that formerly, as we see in Rowe's print, the two pictures were half-lengths hung up in the closet. Perhaps Holman's† way of representing this part of the scene was better than either. The picture of the then King hung up in the lady's closet, but the miniature of the King who was dead was produced by Hamlet from his bosom."

Caldecott refers to Malone's note, and adds (note 85, pages 89, 90):—

"There can be little doubt that such was the furniture of the stage in our author's day, and that the respective portraits were pointed out by the finger in representation: and such, probably, continued to be the course down to the death of Betterton. In modern practice miniatures are produced from the neck and pocket. The "pictures in little" of that age, of which, in common with his contemporaries, our author speaks in ii., 2

* John, fourth Lord Chedworth, was the grandson of John Howe, of Stowell, made Baron of Chedworth in 1741. He "was a man of most recluse habits and eccentric character, but of some minor pretensions to literature." (*See* "Collins' Extinct Peerage," by Sir E. Brydges, vol. viii., p. 141.)

NOTE.—I am indebted for this excerpt and reference to the courtesy of Mr. Harrison, the Librarian of the London Library. I failed to find any account of Lord Chedworth in several books to which I referred.

† Holman was Joseph George Holman, son of an officer in the British army, descended from a very good family, educated at Oxford, where he was not undistinguished. It is remarkable as showing the liberality of the then University authorities that he was allowed to keep a term after having appeared on the stage. (*See* "Biographia Dramatica," vol. i., part i., page 357.)

(Haml. to Rosencr.), might have been as commodiously used for this purpose as modern miniatures; but by this process the audience are not permitted to judge of what they hear, to make any estimate of the comparative defects and excellencies even of the features: and as to the "station" or imposing attitude, "the combination and the form," it is impossible, in so confined a space, that these could be presented to each other; that of these, even the parties themselves should be able to form any adequate idea."

In Mr. Fitzgerald's "Life of David Garrick" I find the following paragraph in the account there given of Garrick's Hamlet (vol. ii., page 65):—

"It was a pity he did not break through the stale old tradition of Hamlet's pulling out the two miniatures, instead of the finer notion suggested by Davies, of having them on the tapestry—or the better idea still, of seeing them with his mind's eye only."

This is the only passage I have been able to find in any book on the subject of "Hamlet" in which this suggestion is made, and I am inclined to believe that Salvini had already introduced this innovation, in which case Mr. Fitzgerald's idea might not be so original as, at first sight, it appears.

The annotators of the Clarendon Series "Hamlet" adopt the full-length figures.

Mr. Fechter was, I believe, the first to avail himself of the two miniatures in a manner which, whether justifiable or not, was certainly very effective. In his arrangement of this scene, the Queen wore the miniature of Claudius round her neck, while Hamlet wore that of his father; at the end of the eloquent description of the two portraits, Mr. Fechter tore the miniature of Claudius from off his mother's neck and flung it away from him, while he subsequently made use of that of his father, which he wore himself, at the last "good night" which Hamlet says to his mother, by pointing to it with pathetic earnestness, as if to enforce the remonstrance —"go not to my uncle's bed."

Ernesto Rossi, when I saw him at Naples, had much the same arrangement, but he went further, and not only tore the portrait of Claudius from Gertrude's neck, but broke it into pieces and trampled on the fragments.

I have here collected all the evidence I can find as to the practice of the old actors in this scene, and I have mentioned that of some of the more celebrated living representatives of Hamlet. I have also given the opinions of some of the most able commentators on the point in question, and it will be seen that both practice and opinion are decidedly in favour of the actual representation of the two portraits on the stage. But the course adopted by Mr. Irving and Signor Salvini has found favour with so many of our critics, for whose judgment and taste I have the greatest respect and admiration, that I cannot but feel some hesitation in differing from them;

yet the more I examine the language of Shakespeare in this speech of Hamlet's, the more I am convinced that he intended the actor to draw his illustrations from real and visible portraits.

The very first line—

> Look here upon this picture, and on this—

seems to me totally inconsistent with anything but two actual pictures then before the Queen's eyes. If the portraits existed but in "the mind's eye" of Hamlet, what sense is there in his using the two demonstrative pronouns?—how could he point out any contrast between two portraits which he had not yet drawn? He might have said, "Look upon this picture—that I am now going to draw in imagination," but he could not say, "Compare it with this which I am going to draw afterwards." The word "counterfeit" seems to me inapplicable to a mere *ideal* representation; it is always used by Shakespeare of some *actual* imitation. We have, too, as every reader will remember, the same word used of a portrait in the well-known passage beginning

> Fair Portia's counterfeit! What demi-god
> Hath come so near creation?

There Bassanio is describing a portrait, and a portrait of remarkable excellence and accuracy. The beautiful details in Hamlet's description are naturally suggested by a visible picture; and it seems to me they would lose all their force, as far as Gertrude is concerned, if they were not actually represented before her eyes. We may gather that no two men could be a greater contrast, physically and morally, than were Claudius and the elder Hamlet; and that contrast, even allowing for the proverbial flattery of painters, must have existed in their portraits: the eloquent description of Hamlet, aided by the actual pictures before her, would impress that contrast so forcibly on the Queen as to make her ashamed of her infidelity to her husband, even on merely *physical* grounds. This is what Hamlet aims at in the first part of his speech; he has to deal with a woman of hot passions, of fickle nature, of little depth of character, and certainly not possessed of a vivid imagination: how could he break down more effectively the barriers of self-deceit and shameless lust than by showing her that, even in outward and physical charms, her paramour was glaringly inferior to him whom she had betrayed? Having thus derided the personal appearance of Claudius, Hamlet proceeds to lay bare the deformities of his soul. Her idol has been subjected to a rude process of disenchantment; the mind of Gertrude is the more ready to listen to the vehement denunciation of his crimes which her son now pours forth.

It must not be forgotten that the essence of dramatic writing consists in the writer being able to place himself in the same position and under the same circumstances, to feel the same passions, to be influenced by the same motives, as the characters of his play; the moment that he begins to address his dialogue more to the audience

than to the characters on the stage, he ceases to be dramatic. No dramatist has ever preserved the individuality of his characters with so much care as Shakespeare; nobody has ever made them act and react upon one another in a more natural way. With very few exceptions, and those only in his inferior works, do we find that Shakespeare ever makes his characters obviously talk *at the spectators*, and not *to one another;* his poetry, his pathos, and his humour very rarely, if ever, jar upon one's sense of fitness; they belong essentially to the characters in whose mouth he puts them. Now it seems to me that it would be eminently undramatic to make Hamlet appeal solely to the imaginative power of Gertrude with regard to the "presentment" of these two pictures: a woman who is so deficient in idealistic and imaginative power, whose fancy is so little impressionable as not to be able to imagine that she sees anything, when Hamlet is making his earnest appeal to the Ghost, would scarcely be able to realise the pictures in the air, which, if we follow Irving and Salvini, are the only pictures by which Hamlet illustrates his eloquent description. I must not be understood for one moment as complaining that the Queen does not pretend to see a Ghost which she cannot really see; I am only insisting on this evidence of the unimpressionable nature of her ideal faculties, as a reason why Shakespeare should not have represented Hamlet as appealing, unnecessarily, to those faculties when he might so easily appeal to her senses. There is no reason why the pictures should not be there; and there are very many reasons why they should. I cannot agree with those critics who see something intensely artistic and poetical in making these pictures exist only in the mind's eye of Hamlet: the real poetic beauty of the passage lies in the language used by him in describing his father's picture; and this beauty is no more lessened by the fact that the pictures are absolutely visible on the scene, than is the magnificent description of Cleopatra in her barge, given by Enobarbus, to be depreciated because he had absolutely seen what he so exquisitely describes.*

As far as concerns the actor himself, I think that he loses much in effect by the absence of the pictures.

We have, then, the choice of several ways in which the pictures might be arranged; if they are miniatures, Hamlet could either produce them both from his pocket, as Davies mentions was the custom of the stage since the Restoration; or he could produce the one of his father from his own breast, while that of Claudius might be hanging round the neck of the Queen; or both might be on the Queen's table. The mention by Hamlet of the fact that pictures

* This must not be taken as expressing any partiality on my part for that practice of presenting to the audience pageantry only referred to in Shakespeare's plays; a practice begun, I believe, by Charles Kean. What I mean to insist upon is that no poetic description is less poetic because the poet himself, or the character through whose mouth he speaks, has actually seen what he describes.

in little* (*i.e.*, miniatures) of his uncle were being sold (Act II., Scene 2, line 349) would account for his possessing one. I have often thought that most of the objections to the use of the miniatures might be got over by having two full-length miniatures, such as were not uncommon in the time of Shakespeare, on the table at which Gertrude would be in the habit of sitting. If the pictures are represented on the walls they should not be half-lengths; nor should they be opposite, but close to one another. This arrangement would seem to be indicated by the line where Hamlet speaks of the portrait of Claudius—

> Like a mildew'd ear,
> Blasting his wholesome brother.

He could hardly say this of two pictures at a long distance from one another; indeed, this line tells very much in favour of the use of miniatures, as with them it is very easy for Hamlet to place the two pictures close to one another, and so most forcibly to illustrate the simile which he uses.

On the whole, I myself should prefer the portraits to be represented as full-lengths, fixed on two adjacent panels of the wall. In Mr. Drake's "Shakespeare and his Times" (vol. ii., page 119) I find the following passage:—

"*Pictures* constituted a frequent decoration in the rooms of the wealthy, and there are numerous instances to prove that those which were estimated as valuable were covered by *curtains*. Olivia, addressing Viola in *Twelfth Night*, says: 'We will draw the curtain, and show you the picture.' The same imagery occurs in *Troilus and Cressida*, where Pandarus, unveiling Cressida, uses almost the same words: 'Come, draw this curtain and let us see your picture.' The passage, however, which Mr. Douce has quoted in illustration of this subject, as it decides the point, will supersede all further reference: 'In Deloney's *Pleasant History of Jack of Newbery*, printed before 1597, it is recorded,' he remarks, 'that in a faire large parlour which was wainscotted round about, Jacke of Newbery had fifteene faire pictures hanging, *which were covered with curtaines of greene silke*, fringed with gold, which he would often shew to his friends.'"

This passage has suggested to me the idea that the pictures in

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* The passage (Act II., Scene 2)—

It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father lived, give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece, for his picture in little—

has puzzled me much, and I have often been tempted to think that the right sense of it has been missed, and that what Hamlet really means is that now his uncle is King of Denmark the people give "twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece" for his picture on gold coins. If the sums named could be proved to be of the same value as of coins current at the time, I should be bold enough to advance this theory: at present I only offer it as a conjecture.

the Queen's closet might be fitted with curtains; and that while the curtain belonging to the portrait of Claudius might be drawn aside so as to show the whole of the picture, that belonging to the portrait of the elder Hamlet might be drawn across so as to conceal the picture. When the Queen asks of Hamlet—

> What act,
> That roars so loud, and thunders in the index?—

Hamlet might take hold of her hand and lead her up the stage, or, at any rate, turn her round so as to place her face to face with the portrait of her late husband. He might then go up to the portrait, and, drawing the curtain aside with a grand and dignified gesture, begin the speech—

> Look here upon this picture, and on this.

It seems to me that this business (to use a technical term) would give the actor an opportunity for displaying much more grace and dignity than he can, if, as Irving and Salvini, he remains seated in the chair and merely points to two imaginary portraits. After the words—

> What judgment
> Would step from this to this?—

he would return to his mother, who would by this time have begun to feel the shame which, at last, overwhelms her. This arrangement, while it gives variety to the attitudes of the actor, seems to me to lend force to the striking contrast which Hamlet draws between the two brothers.

It is probable that, though Claudius, as I have said, was more jovial and voluptuous in appearance than King Hamlet, he was much inferior to his brother in grace and dignity: the contrast between the two portraits might well be such as to justify Hamlet's language, if his father were represented as standing dressed in full armour, in an attitude of defiance, while his uncle was represented as seated, in his state robes, on the throne, or at the banquet-table, presenting an exact antithesis, in his realisation of mere sensual splendour, to the god-like majesty of his predecessor.

APPENDIX L.

Quarto, 1603.

HAM. * * * * * * *

Enter the ghost in his night gowne.

Saue me, saue me, you gratious
Powere aboue, and houer ouer mee,
With your celestiall wings.

Doe you not ceme your tardy sonne to chide,
That I thus long haue let reuenge slippe by?
O do not glare with lookes so pittifull!
Leet that my heart of stone yeelde to compassion,
And euery part that should assist reuenge,
Forgoe their proper powers, and fall to pitty.

GHOST. Hamlet, I once againe appeare to thee,
To put thee in remembrance of my death:
Doe not neglect, nor long time put it off.
But I perceiue by thy distracted lookes,
Thy mother's fearefull, and she stands amazde:
Speake to her Hamlet, for her sex is weake,
Comfort thy mother, Hamlet, thinke on me.

HAM. How i'st with you Lady?

QUEENE. Nay, how i'st with you
That thus you bend your eyes on vacancie,
And holde discourse with nothing but with ayre?

HAM. Why doe you nothing heare?

QUEENE. Not I.

HAM. Nor doe you nothing see?

QUEENE. No neither. [father, in the habite

HAM. No, why see the king my father, my
As he liued, look you how pale he lookes,
See how he steales away out of the Portall,
Looke, there he goes.

exit ghost.

QUEENE. Alas, it is the weaknesse of thy braine,
Which makes thy tongue to blazon thy heart's
But as I have a soule, I sweare by heauen, [griefe:
I neuer knew of this most horride murder:
But Hamlet, this is onely fantasie,
And for my loue forget these idle fits.

HAM. Idle, no mother, my pulse doth beate [like yours,
It is not madnesse that possesseth Hamlet.

Cambridge Edn. Shakespeare's Works, 1866.

HAM. * * * * * * *

Enter GHOST.

Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,
You heavenly guards! What would your gracious [figure?

QUEEN. Alas, he's mad!

HAM. Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
The important acting of your dread command?
O, say!

GHOST. Do not forget: this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.

But look, amazement on thy mother sits:
O, step between her and her fighting soul:
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest worke:
Speak to her, Hamlet.

HAM. How is it with you, lady?

QUEEN. Alas, how is't with you,
That you do bend your eye on vacancy
And with the incorporal air do hold discourse?
Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep;
And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,
Your bedded hairs, like life in excrements,
Start up and stand on end. O gentle son,
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?

HAM. On him, on him! Look you, how pale he [glares!
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable. Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects: then what I have to do
Will want true colour; tears perchance for blood.

QUEEN. To whom do you speak this?

HAM. Do you see nothing there?

QUEEN. Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

HAM. Nor did you nothing hear?

QUEEN. No, nothing but ourselves.

HAM. Why, look you there! look, how it steals
My father, in his habit as he lived! [away!
Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!

Exit Ghost.

QUEEN. This is the very coinage of your brain:
This bodiless creation ecstacy
Is very cunning in.

HAM. Ecstacy!
My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music: it is not madness
That I have utter'd: bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word, which madness
Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks:
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue,
For in the fatness of these pursy times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.

O mother, if euer you did my deare father loue,
Forbeare the adulterous bed to night,

And win your selfs by little as you may,
In time it may be you wil lothe him quite:

And mother, but assist mse in revenge,
And in his death your infamy shall die.

QUEENE. *Hamlet*, I vow by that maiesty,
That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our [hearts,
I will conceale, consent, and doe my best,
What stratagem soe're thou shalt deuise.

HAM. It is enough, mother good night:
Come sir, I'le prouide for you a graue,
Who was in life a foolish prating knaue.

Exit Hamlet with the dead body.

QUEEN. O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in [twain.

HAM. O, throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.
Good night: but go not to my uncle's bed;

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either . . . . the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

Once more, good night:
And when you are desirous to be blest,
I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord,
(*Pointing to Polonius*)
I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him. So, again, good night.
I must be cruel, only to be kind:
Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind.
One word more, good lady.

QUEEN. What shall I do?

HAM. Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed;
Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse;
And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know;
For who, that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide? who would do so?
No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep
And break your own neck down. [breath

QUEEN. Be thou assured, if words be made of
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me.

HAM. I must to England; you know that?

QUEEN. Alack,
I had forgot: 'tis so concluded on. [fellows,

HAM. There's letters seal'd: and my two school-
Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
They bear the mandate; they must sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work;
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar: and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon: O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
This man shall set me packing:
I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret and most grave,
Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you.
Good night, mother.
(*Exeunt severally; Hamlet dragging in Polonius.*)

Appendix M.

Enter Horatio *and the* Queene.

Hor. Madame, your sonne is safe arriv'de in *Denmarke*,
This letter I euen now receiv'd of him,
Whereas he writes how he escap't the danger,
And subtle treason that the king had plotted,
Being crossed by the contention of the windes,
He found the Packet sent to the king of *England*,
Wherein he saw himselfe betray'd to death,
As at his next conuersion with your grace,
He will relate the circumstance at full.

Queene. Then I perceiue there's treason in his lookes
That seem'd to sugar o're his villanie :
But I will soothe and please him for a time,
For murderous mindes are alwayes jealous,
But know not you *Horatio* where he is ?

Hor. Yes, Madame, and he hath appoynted me
To meete him on the east side of the Cittie
To-morrow morning.

Queene. O faile not, good *Horatio* and withall, commend me
A mothers care to him, bid him a while
Be wary of his presence, lest that he
Faile in that he goes about.

Hor. Madam, neuer make doubt of that :
I thinke by this the news be come to court :
He is arriv'de, obserue the king, and you shall
Quickely finde, *Hamlet* being here,
Things fell not to his minde.

Queene. But what became of *Gilderstone* and *Rossencraft* ?

Hor. He being set ashore, they went for *England*,
And in the Packet there writ down that doome
To be perform'd on them poynted for him :
And by great chance he had his father's Seale,
So all was done without discouerie.

Queene. Thankes be to Heauen for blessing of the prince,
Horatio once againe I take my leaue,
With thowsand mothers blessings to my sonne.

Hor. Madam adue.

Appendix N.

King. Why this his madnesse will undoe our state.
Lordes goe to him, inquire the body out.

Gil. We will, my Lord. [*Exeunt Lordes.*

King. Gertred, your son shall presently to England,
His shipping is already furnished,
And we have sent by Rossencraft and Gilderstone,
Our letters to our deare brother of England,
For Hamlet's welfare and his happinesse :
Happly the aire and climate of the country
May please him better than his native home :
See where he comes.

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APPENDIX P.

HAMLET'S AGE.

THE question of Hamlet's age is one which has often puzzled the critics no less than the students of Shakespeare. A writer in the *Examiner*,* signing himself "W. Minto," in a review of Professor Dowden's "Essays on Shakespeare," drew attention to the injury done to the significance of the play by the prevailing belief that Hamlet was thirty years old. I do not agree with him that it is necessary to believe Hamlet to have been a youth of seventeen, but I certainly think that Shakespeare intended him to be nearer twenty than thirty. Not only are the general features of his character those of youth, but there are so many allusions to the fact that he was very young, scattered throughout the play, that we cannot bring ourselves to believe that he was really thirty years old.

I here subjoin some of these passages In Act I., Scene 1, lines 169-170, Horatio says—

> Let us impart what we have seen to-night
> Unto young Hamlet.

This might be an expression which Horatio would have been accustomed to use in order to distinguish Hamlet from his father; but the language of Laertes and Polonius is much stronger:

> LAER. For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
> Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
> A violet in the youth of primy nature.
> —Act I., Scene 2, lines 5—8.

This language, and much else that Laertes says, seems inapplicable to a man of thirty.

> POL. For Lord Hamlet
> Believe so much of him that he is young.
> —Act I., Scene 2, lines 123-124.

The Ghost says—

> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood.
> —Act I., Scene 5, lines 15-16.

And again (line 38)—

> But know, thou noble youth.

The tone in which the Queen speaks to her son in the closet scene is not such as a mother could well employ to a man of thirty:

> Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
> —Act III., Scene 4, line 9.

And—

> Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.—(Line 11.)

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* See *Examiner*, March 6th, 1875.

These are the principal references to Hamlet's youth which seem, especially those uttered by Laertes and Polonius, to be irreconcilable with the supposition that he was thirty years old.

With regard to the evidence afforded by this scene with the Gravedigger, I do not think it decisive as to the fact that Hamlet was thirty years old. The words—

I have been sexton here, man and boy, for thirty years

may mean that he had begun to serve his apprenticeship thirty years ago; but he may not have come to the trade of gravemaker till some years later: so that it does not necessarily follow that the day when King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras was thirty years ago.

The most difficult point to get over in this scene is the statement that Yorick's skull had lain in the grave twenty-three years. In the first quarto (1603) the time is a dozen years, and there is no mention made of the thirty years. The lines are—

Looke you, here's a scull hath bin here these dozen yeare,
Let me see, I ever since our last King Hamlet
Slew Fortenbrasse in combat, yong Hamlets father,
—Allen's Reprint, p. 86.

It would appear that Shakespeare added these details, which tend to prove Hamlet to have been thirty years old, for much the same reason as he inserted the line—

He's fat and scant of breath—

namely, in order to render Hamlet's age and personal appearance more in accordance with those of the great actor, Burbage, who personated him. If all that is said of Burbage by some of his contemporaries is true, he was worth such a slight sacrifice on the part of the poet.

The most material objection against Hamlet being more than twenty to twenty-three years of age is that, if he were older, his mother could scarcely have been the object of a passion such as that of Claudius. Gertrude could hardly have been more than forty years old; so that if Hamlet was thirty, she must have been married at a very tender age.

I do not think this question of so much importance on the stage as it is in the study. The actor should try and look as young as he can, without having recourse to much paint. But it would be a sad mistake to exclude a great artist from the *rôle* of Hamlet because he could not look twenty years old. Still it is quite as well to remember that Hamlet was in the prime of his youth, for much of his eccentricity may be easier accounted for if this fact is borne in mind.

ADDITIONAL NOTES.

Note 1.

I have said the best criticism "*on the whole*," I do not mean to say that there are not many criticisms on individual plays, which are better than those of Schlegel. The work of Professor Gervinus, in two vols., which has been translated into English, is one of the most valuable additions to the Shakespearian literature of modern times; it was originally published in 1850, and the English translation in 1863; I have alluded more fully to this author's essay on "Hamlet" in another part of this work. Ulrici also merits the warmest praise, from every lover of Shakespeare, for his volume of delightful and learned essays on our great poet's dramatic genius. In assigning to Schlegel the first place among the critics of Shakespeare, I do not wish to be guilty of any injustice to the numerous English and Germau writers who have made our author the subject of so many valuable essays: I do not pretend to express anything more than my opinion, which is that, for practical purposes, Schlegel's estimate of Shakespeare's plays, is *on the whole*, the best guide to any would-be student of our greatest dramatist.

Note 1a.

I am afraid that few critics will agree with me on this point; indeed, the fact that Hamlet says (line 151)—

> Come on: you hear this fellow in the cellarage:

would seem to settle the question. Still more decisive would be line 161, if we admit the reading of the Quarto 1604 (which is followed by the other quartos)—

> Ghost (*beneath*). Swear by his sword.

True the Quarto 1603 and the Folios all read simply—

GHOST (*beneath*). Swear.

But if Shakespeare deliberately added the words "by his sword" when he revised the piece it would certainly seem that he meant Horatio and Marcellus to hear the subterranean voice.

The reason why I have always believed that Horatio and Marcellus were not supposed to hear the Ghost is, that Shakespeare had so carefully prevented the Ghost from uttering a single word in their hearing before, and that the Queen certainly cannot hear its voice in the closet-scene. But in the latter case she cannot see the Ghost either; and, as to the former point, the silence of the apparition might arise from the fact that it had not yet communicated to Hamlet its solemn charge. It is remarkable that Hamlet, in proposing the oath to Horatio and Marcellus, twice insists on their not revealing what they had seen—first (line 144)—

> Never make known what you have seen to-night.

The Ghost had not yet spoken from beneath; but after he has done so, Hamlet still says (line 153)—

> Never to speak of this that you have seen,
> Swear by my sword.

It is not till the next time that he says (line 159)—

> Never to speak of this that you have heard,
> Swear by my sword.

But I do not think that either this line or even the words which I have quoted above—

> You hear this fellow in the cellarage—

exclude the possibility of my supposition; they are both consistent with the fact that Hamlet is afraid they may have heard the Ghost, but is not sure; certain it is that he is very anxious they should not hear it, either from fear that it might reveal the secret of his father's death, or that the sound might so unnerve the others that they would be unable to take the proposed oath. Hamlet, as we know,* did afterwards confide what the Ghost had told him to Horatio: it is Marcellus whom he distrusts.

Hamlet cannot mean by "what you have heard" only the subterranean utterances of the Ghost—he must have referred to the half-revelation which he had made immediately on the re-entrance of his friends after his interview with the Ghost, the exact extent of which, in his agitated state of mind, he probably did not know, but which he feared might be sufficient to guide them to some conclusion near the truth, and to furnish them with materials for

* See Act III., Scene 2, lines 71, 72—

> One scene of it comes near the circumstance
> *Which I have told thee* of my father's death.

gossip with the courtiers; if such gossip reached the ears of Claudius it would serve to put him on his guard, the very thing which Hamlet was so anxious to avoid. It may be remarked here that both seem to have kept their oath most religiously, for we do not find that any other person about the Court had the slightest knowledge of the Ghost's appearance.

It seems to me that this scene would gain in solemnity if the voice of the Ghost were supposed to be heard by Hamlet alone. The fact of his hurrying Horatio and Marcellus from one part of the scene to another, in obedience to a voice which they could not hear, a voice to whose utterances he made mysterious references and gave mysterious answers, would quite account for the awe-struck words of Horatio—

O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Note 2.

In Act III., Scene 2, there is a line spoken by Ophelia which may help us to decide the exact length of the interval which elapsed. In answer to Hamlet's speech—

. . . . What should a man do but be merry? for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours—

Ophelia says,

Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.

Now, we know from Hamlet's first soliloquy, in Act I., that at that period his father had not been dead two months, but only a little more than one. If we may take Ophelia's expression as being accurate, a period of at least two months and a-half must have elapsed; but Hamlet in his reply,

. . . . O heavens! die two months ago, and not forgotten yet?

seems to ignore the important word "twice," though the word twice is found in every early edition of the play, including the Quarto 1603. But, for his purpose, Hamlet did not want to be very accurate as to the time; therefore we may take it, as far as Shakespeare has cared to inform us, that from two to three months intervened at this point of the story.

NOTE 3.

I am most dreadfully attended.

I CANNOT find any commentary on this passage, which seems to me to be a very important one. It is the only complaint which Hamlet utters as to the neglect with which he was treated at court. We never find him attended by anybody but his chosen confidant Horatio, or by those two courtiers whose presence was, from time to time, forced upon him by the King, and could not be, after this scene, anything but very unwelcome to him. As heir-apparent to the throne, Hamlet might expect to have some more ceremonious attendance; but though he here complains of the little state with which he was surrounded, his comparative solitude in the Court was, we cannot doubt, of his own choosing. After the appearance of the Ghost he seems to have withdrawn himself more and more from any society but that of Horatio; even Marcellus is never found again in his company; he holds little or no conversation with anybody but Horatio.

It would not be uninteresting to follow out the parallel between Hamlet and Prince Henry which Gervinus commences; both princes seem to have, more or less voluntarily, abandoned that state which naturally belonged to them, but from very different reasons. Hamlet assumes the retirement, and want of ceremony, which belong to a private individual, because only two persons in the Court can rise, in any way, to his moral level; Prince Henry assumes the licence of a private individual because none in his father's court can be found to sink to his moral level; the one throws off the prince to assume the *rôle* of a low brawler and reveller, the other surrenders the privileges of his position from affection for his father's memory, and from all-absorbing sorrow for his death.

It is quite consistent with Hamlet's character, and with human nature generally, that he should, at one and the same time, studiously avoid any intercourse with the natural associates of a man in his position, and yet complain of a lack of that proper attendance, that sort of court within a court, which generally surrounds the heir-apparent to the throne. Nor was this complaint so unreasonable as it may seem; putting aside the fact that by right the throne was his, it is evident that Claudius's professions of regard for Hamlet as his son and natural successor were nothing but professions; and that the courtiers who surrounded him were quite capable of appreciating the worth of these professions, and of giving practical expression to the dislike and disrespect which the King himself dared not openly show towards Hamlet.

It may be observed that just before this passage Hamlet says that he has bad dreams. The many instances of playing upon words, found in the course of this play, may warrant the suspicion that

the sentence "I am most dreadfully attended" contains a double meaning; and that Hamlet may refer to the visitation of the Ghost, and to those haunting thoughts and images created by its appearance, which attended him both sleeping and waking.

NOTE 4.

I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.

No adequate explanation of this passage appears to me to be offered by any of the commentators; the proverb "he doesn't know a hawk from a hernshaw," that is, from a heron, is said to have been a common one, and is found in Ray's Proverbs, p. 196, and in other collections; but the only passage quoted is from Langston's "Lusus Poeticus," 1675 (*see* Pennant's "British Zoology," "The Heron," quoted in Richardson's Dictionary *sub voce* Heron). The corruption of "*hernshaw*" into "*handsaw*" may have originated in a vulgar mistake, or in a stupid attempt to be funny on the part of some person.*

Of the first part of this, in all the old commentators, I can find no explanation,† and yet I cannot help thinking that the words

I am but mad north-north-west

must have had some inner meaning, or conveyed a reference to some well-known expression. The only attempt to throw any light on this obscure passage is to be found in the Notes to the "Clarendon" Hamlet (Oxford, 1873); and for this explanation the editors acknowledge their indebtedness to Mr. J. C. Heath, formerly Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. I take leave to insert it here:—

"The expression obviously refers to the sport of hawking. Most birds, especially one of heavy flight, like the heron, when roused by the falconer or his dog, would fly down or with the wind, in order to escape. When the wind is from the north the heron flies towards the south, and the spec-

* This corruption, Nares says, had taken place before the time of Shakespeare. "Herneshaw" is explained by Cotgrave as a "shaw of wood where hernes breed," "*Haironnière;*" so that Dr. Johnson had better authority for giving this interpretation than Nares supposed. Shaw is an old Saxon word for "shady place."

† The quotation given by Steevens does not help us much:—

"But I perceive now, either the winde is at the south,
Or else your tongue cleaveth to the roofe of your mouth."
—"Damon and Pythias," 1582.

He might just as well have quoted the proverb—

"When the wind is in the south,
It blows the bait into the fishes' mouth."

tator may be dazzled by the sun, and be unable to distinguish the hawk from the heron. On the other hand, when the wind is southerly, the heron flies towards the north, and it and the pursuing hawk are clearly seen by the sportsman, who then has his back to the sun, and without difficulty knows the hawk from the hernsew. A curious reader may further observe that a wind from the precise point north-north-west would be in the eye of the sun at half-past ten in the forenoon, a likely time for hawking, whereas 'southerly' includes a wider range of wind for a good view."

This explanation is very ingenious; but I should like to have seen it supported by some passages from any of the books on Falconry to which Shakespeare might have had access. I have always thought that Hamlet here meant to intimate to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he was only mad in one direction (*i.e.*, before the King and Court), and that possibly by some gesture he may have indicated his meaning.

The hawk and heron are certainly as unlike as any two birds can be; the only point of resemblance between them being that they are both mischievous, for the heron is quite as destructive to fish as the hawk is to game. In the proverb the sense undoubtedly is, "he does not know a hawk from its prey;" and Hamlet's meaning may be thus expressed—"I am not so mad but I know a knave from a fool, even if that fool be a mischievous one."

Note 5.

Malone has the following note (vol. vii., page 405, note 3, ed. 1821) on the words "I must to England":

"Shakespeare does not inform us how Hamlet came to know that he was to be sent to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were made acquainted with the King's intentions for the first time in the very last scene; and they do not appear to have had any communication with the Prince since that time. Add to this, that in a subsequent scene, when the King, after the death of Polonius, informs Hamlet he was to go to England, he expresses great surprise, as if he had not heard anything of it before. This last, however, may, perhaps, be accounted for, as contributing to his design of passing for a madman."

The first mention of the scheme of sending Hamlet to England occurs in Act III., Scene 1, lines 168—175:

> I have in quick determination
> Thus set it down:—he shall with speed to England,
> For the demand of our neglected tribute:
> Haply the seas and countries different
> With variable objects shall expel
> This something-settled matter in his heart,
> Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
> From fashion of himself.

The Queen apparently was not present, only Polonius (see *ante*, page 41): the next allusion to it is in the third scene of the same

act, when the King broaches the plan to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The action would seem to be continuous, at any rate to the end of Scene 1, if not to the end of the act. We must mark the Queen's answer: Hamlet's words are:

> I must to England; you know that?

To which his mother replies—

> Alack,
> I had forgot; 'tis so concluded on—

showing that she had heard of the proposed embassy to England. Unless we suppose that an interval of time* is intended to elapse between the first and second scenes of this act, she must have been informed of his intention by Claudius, when they retired so abruptly in the middle of the play represented before the Court. Hamlet could only have heard of the project in the short interval which elapsed between his leaving the King kneeling in his closet (Scene 3) and his interview with his mother (Scene 4). It is quite possible that Shakespeare meant us to suppose that, while Hamlet passed through the corridors of the palace, some of the courtiers, if not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves, had told him of the King's intention. I cannot conceive that it was a mere oversight on Shakespeare's part; for we must not forget that he revised the whole play, and this very scene in particular. Surely Malone is not justified in saying, as far as the text is concerned, that Hamlet expresses any surprise when (Act IV., Scene 3, lines 44, 45) the King tells him that everything is ready for his journey to England; he merely repeats the words, "For England;" and twice afterwards, "Come, for England" (line 47 and line 52); this very repetition might have warned the King that Hamlet was not without suspicion of his design; but he seems to have had no apprehension on this point. It is very likely that, by repeating these words, Hamlet desired to remind his mother of what he had said to her; and to assure her that she need have no fear of his incurring any danger from over-trusting the companions which the King had chosen for him.

I may notice here Ulrici's plausible conjecture that Hamlet visited England in order to obtain the support of that power in a quarrel with his country:

> "He cheerfully obeys the command to visit England, evidently with the view and in the hopes of there obtaining the means and opportunity (perhaps the support of England, and a supply of money and men, for an open quarrel with his uncle) to set about the work in a manner worthy both of himself and its own importance. This hope he is evidently alluding to when he says, 'Tis the sport to have the enginer,' &c."—(*See* "Shakespeare's Dramatic Art," by H. Ulrici, p. 220.)

I do not think this conjecture as justifiable as it is ingenious.

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* *See* "Scheme of Time, &c.," page 201.

Note 5a.

In Caldecott's Edition (1819), p. 98, the following passages are given :—

"When princes (as the toy takes them in the head) have used courtiers as *sponges to drinke* what juice they can from the poore people, they take pleasure afterwards to wringe them out into their owne cisternes."—R. C.'s "Henr. Steph. Apology for Herodotus," Fo. 1608, p. 81.

"Vespasian, when reproached for bestowing high office upon persons most rapacious, answered, 'that he served his turne with such officers as with *spunges*, which, when they had drunke their fill, were then fittest to be pressed.'"—Barnabe Rich's "Faultes, faults and nothing else but faults," 4to, 1606, p. 44b. (*See* Suetonius, Vespas., c. 16.)

This last passage bears such a remarkable similarity to the lines in the play, that it is almost certain Shakespeare, or the author of the older play of "Hamlet," must have borrowed the idea from the same source to which Barnabe Rich was indebted—viz., Suetonius.

This speech about the sponge, &c., was restored by Mr. Irving; the first time, I believe, it has been given on the stage: he spoke it in Act IV., Scene 2, where, as I have said in the text, it is placed in the Quarto 1603.

Note 6.

It is a curious fact that neither in this passage nor in Scene 2, Act V., in which Hamlet relates to Horatio the counterplot by which he had defeated the King's treachery, does Shakespeare give any clue to the precise nature of the government which he intended to represent as existing in England at the time of this play; but from the expression here used by the King, it would seem to have been a monarchy, paying tribute to Denmark. (*See* also Hamlet's words, Scene 2, Act V., line 39—

As England was his faithful tributary.)

It may be remarked that in the speech of the King we have one of the very few allusions which would tend to fix the historical period of the play :—

And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—
As my great power thereof may give thee sense,
Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red
After the Danish sword, and thy free awe
Pays homage to us—

The first invasion of the Danes was in 783, the last in 1074; the first historical King of Denmark was Sigurd Snogoje, whose reign was from 794 to 803; his immediate predecessor was Ragnor Lodbrog, who was said to have been killed in an attempt to invade England in 794. The period of Hamlet's existence in Saxo Grammaticus is placed about the second century before Christ; but the chronology of Saxo is utterly worthless. As after 794 we have the names of all the kings of Denmark preserved, Hamlet must have existed, if he ever really did exist, before then; and as England could not have paid tribute to Denmark before 783, the number of years, arguing from the allusion in the text, within which Hamlet could have existed, is very limited. The fact is, that it is utterly impossible to ascertain the exact period of the events in this play, and therefore all the attempts that have been made from time to time to secure historical accuracy in the costumes are mere waste of ingenuity; any time during the ninth or tenth centuries might be taken, according to fancy; but the spirit of the principal character, and many trifling allusions that occur in the play, would even then strike us as anachronisms.

Note 7.

Up from my cabin,
My sea-gown scarf'd about me,

This passage seems to me worthy of notice, but I cannot find any commentary on it: the details given in it are very characteristic; the expression "*Up* from my cabin" is remarkable. We should expect that Hamlet's cabin would have been either in the poop, or stern, of the vessel; or on the first deck—at any rate, below deck. Unless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern slept on the deck, Hamlet would not go *up* from the cabin to search for their papers; but it may be that the vessel, being a small one, the only cabin was given up to him; or it may be simply an oversight on Shakespeare's part. The word "sea-gown" occurs only in this passage in Shakespeare, and is explained by Cotgrave as a "short-sleeved mariner's gown" (French, "*Esclavine*," which is described as a "coarse, high-collared, and short-sleeved gowne, reaching downe to the mid-leg, and used most by seamen, and saylers"); in fact, it was a long-hooded cloak, open in front, very much like those one sees worn by some men now-a-days when travelling. Hamlet in his haste had thrown it round him in the fashion of a scarf or plaid. The descriptive power in this speech and the preceding ones is singularly vivid; while the language of Hamlet is more graphic and less sententious than usual. The active, and not the reflective, part of his nature is for the moment supreme.

Note 8.

Or I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play,—

This expression is rather obscure. The only note on the passage which I can find is in Caldecott's edition (1819), page 149, Note D:

"Ere I could well conceive what they were about, what could be their object in this mission; before I had time to give my first thoughts to their process, they were carrying their projects into act."

The simplest interpretation seems to be, "Before I could make a prologue *in* my brains," or "to the satisfaction of my brains, they had begun the play;" *i.e.*, "Before I could settle in my mind the preliminaries of any counterplot, they had begun the plot itself."

Note 9.

I have a copy of the quarto of 1695, which gives a list of "the persons represented" and the names of the actors and actresses who represented them; in this cast Betterton was the Hamlet and Mrs. Betterton the Ophelia. It was in that very year that this great actor, who was now in his 60th year, opened the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields; he had acted Hamlet at different periods during the last thirty-two years, and it is probable that the excisions which he made in the play were sanctioned by tradition derived from Burbage, who was the original representative of the part. The following notice to the reader is affixed to this edition of the play (1695):—

"This Play being too long to be conveniently Acted, such places as might be least prejudicial to the Plot or Sense, are left out upon the Stage: But that we may no way wrong the incomparable Author, are here inserted according to the Original Copy, with this mark '."

Not one of Betterton's successors has ventured to restore the scene; but I have heard that, recently, Mr. Bandmann, a German actor who has mastered the English language to a certain extent, has done so; with what success I do not know. It would be very interesting if some Shakespearian scholar, with special capabilities for the task, like Mr. Halliwell or Mr. Furnivall, would collate the various acting editions of "Hamlet" adopted by the great actors who have represented this part, from Betterton down to Irving.

Note 10.

That this interval must be a considerable one will be easily seen on careful examination of the remaining scenes of the play. It might be thought that the break occurs at the end of the next scene (Scene 5); but that is impossible, for the conversation between the King and Laertes, which takes place in Scene 7, is evidently part of that which ends Scene 5; the interval occupied by Scene 6 being only sufficient for the King to explain to Laertes the circumstances of Polonius' death, which, if done on the stage, would have been a needless repetition. We find from Scene 6 that Hamlet has returned, the ship in which he sailed having been overtaken by pirates, who made him their prisoner, on the second day of his voyage; how long he was detained by them does not appear, but it must have been for some time, since between Acts IV. and V. there cannot elapse much more than two days, and at the end of Act V. we find that the ambassadors have arrived from England announcing the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that Fortinbras has returned from his expedition against Poland; so that it is evident that, at this point (Act IV., Scene 4) the break implied by the fall of the act-drop ought to occur. Another great advantage would be gained by this arrangement, for, as the play is at present represented, the incident of Ophelia's madness appears to be very abruptly introduced; she has scarcely had time to hear of her father's death; and the impression produced upon the spectator is that her madness was a preconcerted circumstance, and did not arise naturally from the events as Shakespeare intended it to do. If Ophelia's mad scene were to commence a new act, it would be much more effective; and the spectators might then conceive, what was probably the intention of the author, that the abrupt departure of Hamlet for England without attempting any explanation to her, or expressing sorrow for the fatal mistake by which he had killed her father, co-operated with that father's violent and sudden death to overturn a mind on which secret sorrow, and bitter disappointment, had long been preying.

At the end of the "Additional Notes" will be found an arrangement of all the scenes in this play, showing the amount of time occupied by the action and the length of the various intervals supposed to elapse at different points in the course of the tragedy.

Note 11.

That Shakespeare intended to refer to some particular expedition in this passage I have not the slightest doubt; but, unfortunately, I have not been able to trace the source of this description. The particulars given are very remarkable; it was a little patch of

ground—not worth five ducats to farm—yet it was garrisoned by the Polack. I hoped to find the original of this unprofitable expedition in some of the "adventures" undertaken by Sir Walter Raleigh, or by one of the Earls of Essex; but I have not succeeded to my own satisfaction. There are certain points of resemblance between the enterprise of Walter Devereux in 1573, the object of which was to conquer Ulster, or a portion of it, and this expedition of Fortinbras. An unfavourable critic might speak of the members of that adventurous body, of which Walter Devereux was the leader, as "a list of lawless resolutes" without doing them any grievous wrong. Of the apparent value of the country which these brave butchers were to conquer, some idea may be formed from the description given by Froude (vol. x., page 554):

"A few years before, Sir Henry Sidney's progress through Ulster had been gravely compared to Alexander's journey into Bactria. The central plains of Australia, the untrodden jungles of Borneo, or the still vacant spaces in our map of Africa, alone now on the globe's surface represent districts as unknown and mysterious as the north-east angle of Ireland in the reign of Elizabeth. . . . . Ulster was a desert," &c., &c.

One feels on reading this eloquent description that five ducats would have been a high rent to have paid for such a paradise; still the extent of it does not answer to the description in the text. In 1573 Shakespeare was only nine years old; in 1580, when Walter Raleigh joined Grey's force in the attack upon the fort of Smerwick, in Dingle Bay, he was only sixteen: yet both events might have made some impression on his youthful memory. Smerwick, the wretched fort in which the unhappy Spaniards and Italians held out for two days against the English butchers, answers very well to "the Officer's" description of the place against which Fortinbras was leading his "lawless resolutes." It was "a very small neck of land joined to the shore by a bank of sand" (Froude, vol. xi., page 224). It was garrisoned and was regularly besieged and taken by Grey and his followers; the use they made of their conquest is a matter of history; and let us hope few fouler stains rest on the English name. If I could positively identify either Walter Devereux' expedition, or that of Grey, as the original which suggested Shakespeare's description in the text, I should make a proviso, that it is not to be supposed, for one moment, that Fortinbras was guilty of the fiendish barbarities which both those bloodthirsty murderers practised.

The whole of this scene (with the exception of Fortinbras' short speech) has no parallel in the Quarto of 1603; it was evidently added by Shakespeare on the revision of the play, a circumstance which confirms me in the belief that he had some enterprise of that time in his mind.

Note 12.

They cry, "Choose we; Laertes shall be king?"

It would seem that, with "the rabble" at least, the popularity of Claudius had been short-lived. His accession was probably more owing to the nobles than to the people: they had wished to place young Hamlet on his father's throne; and now that he had been sent off by Claudius to England, in order, as they thought, to get rid of him as a successor, the people clamoured to be allowed to choose for themselves and to make Laertes King: Gervinus credits the energy of Laertes with the creation of this "rebellion, which looks giant-like;" but it is probable that he found the work of creation at least half-done: the fact that Hamlet had been sent out of the kingdom had more to do with their riotous attitude than any love either of Laertes himself or of his father, who had been so mysteriously killed. On the question as to whether the Crown of Denmark was elective or not, see an interesting note given in Malone's "Shakespeare" (ed. 1821, vol. vii., p. 209). I must here point out one touch of Shakespeare's art which I have omitted to notice in the text. Immediately there is any mention of rebellion the Queen is as zealous for her husband's cause as if she had never heard anything to shake her faith in him and weaken her affection; this is right; for after all she had chosen him as her lover, and, once married to him, it is more noble in her to be true to him with all his vices than to plot against him, as she proposes her readiness to do in the suppressed scene of the Quarto 1603. (See Appendix M.)

Note 13.

There is some reason for supposing Horatio to have been a soldier, for Bernardo says (Act I., Scene 1, lines 12, 13)—

> If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
> The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

"Rivals" means "companions," or "partners" (see Warburton's Note and Ritson's addition to it—Malone's "Shakespeare" (1821), vol. vii., p. 172). Malone, in his note, says: "Horatio is certainly not an officer, but Hamlet's fellow-student at Wittenburg; but as he accompanied Marcellus and Bernardo on the watch from a motive of curiosity, our poet considers him very properly as an *associate* with them."

So again when Hamlet asks (Act I., Scene 2, line 225)—

> Hold you the watch to-night?

In the Quartos the answer is assigned to "All," in the Folio to "Both"—*i. e.*, to Marcellus and Bernardo only, a reading generally adopted.

But Horatio's own language in his speech in the same scene (lines 196—208) may determine the question; for his language is scarcely reconcilable with the supposition that he was a fellow-officer of Marcellus and Bernardo, or as if "to keep the watch" were his duty. At the same time I do not see the necessity of drawing any distinction between Bernardo and Francisco; they all appear to be on equal terms; an officer does not usually relieve a private soldier on guard. But Bernardo seems to have been on equal terms with Marcellus, who seems to assume a tone of superiority over Francisco. I think all the difficulties on this point might be got over if we suppose that there was in the Court of Denmark some body like our "Yeomen of the Guard," or "Gentlemen at Arms," composed of gentlemen of good birth to whom the duty of keeping the watch near the Palace was committed. Of this body even Horatio might have been a member.

It is somewhat remarkable that, whether by the design of Shakespeare or by accident, Horatio never once speaks to the King throughout the play. The King speaks to him only once (Act V., Scene 1, line 281), when he bids him wait upon Hamlet—

> I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him.

In the scene of Ophelia's madness, when Horatio is present, the King does not address himself to Horatio, but to the "Gentleman"* who had ushered in Ophelia (*see* Act IV., Scene 5).

Horatio was certainly not in favour at the Court of Claudius; he seems to be the only person besides Hamlet who viewed the conduct of that king unfavourably.

Note 14.

> If it be so, Laertes,
> As how should it be so? how otherwise?
> Will you be ruled by me?

This passage, as it stands, seems to me almost hopelessly obscure. In Malone's "Shakespeare" (1821) there is absolutely no note on the passage. Caldecott does not notice it; and even that obstinate illuminator of dark passages, Mr. Collier's old annotator, passes it by without a word of comment.

The editors of the "Clarendon Hamlet" have a note in which they give Keightley's conjecture, "how should it but be so?" They

* Sometimes the "Gentleman" is omitted, and Horatio only is present, in accordance with the stage direction of the Folios.

say, "we should have expected, 'how should it not be so?'" but they do not give the anonymous conjecture to be found in the foot-notes of the "Cambridge Shakespeare" (vol. viii., p. 144), "how shoul't not be so?" which I suspect to be the right reading. They suggest an explanation of the passage as it stands—viz., "that the first clause refers to Hamlet's return, the second to Laertes "feelings." (*See* Clarendon Press Series, "Hamlet," pp. 204, 205.)

I confess that this, the only attempt to explain the words, as they stand, which I can find, does not satisfy me. The fact is, no sense can be made of them, if read as printed in the text. The insertion of the "not" makes them perfectly intelligible. It has occurred to me, as there is no authority for this insertion, that if the word "should" were italicised we might make sense of it, thus—

If it be so—

(*i.e.*, if Hamlet has come back because, on consideration, he did not choose to go to England)—

As how *should* it be so?

(*i.e.*, how should there be any question about it being so?)—

How (could it be) otherwise?

I admit that we should expect, in this case, the word "if" to be repeated, but I can make sense of the speech in no other manner. The general meaning is clear: the King is puzzling over this sudden return of Hamlet, and he rapidly reviews the situation. First he asks—

Are all the rest come back?
Or is it some abuse, and no such thing?

Surely his trusty spaniels, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, cannot have disobeyed or deceived him! Then where are they? They would not go to England without Hamlet, and surely they would not let him escape. The writing is certainly Hamlet's; he answers to Laertes' inquiry—

"Naked!"
And in a postscript here, he says "Alone."

Can they have been wrecked and he alone saved? Hamlet cannot have discovered the plot against him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did not know the contents of the letter—they could not have betrayed him. No—it must be that he has on a sudden caprice refused to continue the voyage, and made the sailors turn back. Yes, it must be so—without question it must be. Then in that case how can he get rid of Hamlet and appease Laertes at one and the same time? Something like these thoughts would pass through the mind of Claudius before he succeeds in hitting upon the ingenious scheme which he now proceeds to divulge to Laertes.

Note 15.

When did the madness of Englishmen take rank as a national characteristic on the Continent? It is hard to say. That inveterate virgin, Good Queen Bess, was sufficiently eccentric to impress the foreigners, who were allowed access to her beauteous presence, with an idea that she was slightly mad. Other monarchs in that age might be eccentric in their vices, but her especial oddity consisted in her virtues. There was a taint of insanity about them. Henry the Eighth was a perfect Bedlam in himself, and might well inspire foreigners with unfavourable views as to the sanity of Englishmen. In the Plantagenets' time, and in that of their immediate successors, the madness of Englishmen chiefly made itself remarkable by the audacious valour with which they gained victories over their foreign foes. Tom Coryat, that most facetious of travellers, might well spread far and wide a reputation for eccentricity on behalf of his countrymen; but his "Crudities" were not given to the public till seven years after the publication of "Hamlet." One ought to examine carefully the journals and letters of foreigners, published during the 16th century, in order to trace the origin of our reputation for madness. In connection with this imputation on our national sanity, it would occur to every reader of Shakespeare to see what Portia has to say of her English suitor. On referring to the passage we find that not madness, nor eccentricity, but two other failings, are there imputed to our countrymen.

> Nerissa. What say you, then, to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?
>
> Portia. You know, I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth of English. He is a proper man's picture, but alas! who can converse with a dumb show? How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behaviour everywhere.
>
> —"Merchant of Venice," Act I., Sc. 2, lines 59-69.

Now, it is singular that up to a very few years ago these two defects were, not without justice, imputed pretty generally to our fellow-countrymen on the Continent—namely, that we could not speak any but our own language, and that our dress was of a nondescript character and in vile taste. The fact that our American cousins have outshone us in both particulars, that certain individual Englishmen have rather distinguished themselves by their fluency in foreign tongues, and that our style of dress has even found favour abroad—all these circumstances have combined to relieve us of these imputations; but still, in the case of the majority of English travellers they are not wholly unreasonable.

NOTE 16.

THE first of these two passages is as follows :—

OSRIC. The king, sir, hath laid, sir, that in a dozen passes between yourself and him, he shall not exceed you three hits : he hath laid on twelve for nine.

Certainly this is very obscurely expressed, for it was impossible that Osric could state anything clearly or simply ; but I think the meaning is plain. "A dozen passes" does not mean simply twelve hits, for in a pass both might score a hit, the wager being that Laertes will not gain three more hits than Hamlet. To do this it is plain Laertes must hit his opponent twelve times at least in every twenty-one, or four times in every seven ; the odds, in short, that Laertes lays on himself are twelve to nine, or four to three. It would have been quite clear if Osric had said that the King had laid that Laertes would not win best out of seven hits three times, for that is what it really comes to. I think the expression "a dozen" was a very vague one in Shakespeare's time, and that if the text is corrupt, the corruption lies in these words. In the Quarto 1603 we find the Gravedigger, speaking of Yorick's skull, says to Hamlet, "Looke you, here's a scull hath bin here these dozen yeare." (*See* Allen's Reprint, page 86, and Appendix P, page 182.)

The other passage I have alluded to is this—

"Thus has he—and many more of the same breed that I know the drossage dotes on—only got the time of the time and outward habit of encounter ; a kind of yesty collection, which carries them through and through the most *fond and winnowed* opinions."

The words in italics are the readings of the Folios. The second and third Quartos read "*prophane and trennowed*," the fourth Quarto, "*prophane and trennowned* ;" the fifth and sixth Quartos, "*profane and trennowned;*" but the 1676 Quarto reads "*prophane and renowned*," which was probably the right reading.

There are various emendations. Johnson suggests "*sane* and renowned." He explains it : "These men have got the cant of the day . . a kind of frothy collection of fashionable prattle which yet carries them through the most select and approved judgments."

Steevens takes "*fond*" to mean foolish, and "*winnowed*," "sifted," "examined," the sense being that such men impose upon not only "the weak, but those of sounder judgment."

I believe the sense to be different, whichever reading we take : "*profane and renowned* opinions" would mean "common and well-known opinions"—profane in the same sense as the Latin *profanus—e. g.:*

Odi profanum vulgus et arceo :

whilst "*fond and winnowed*" would mean "foolish and such as are blown about by the wind." What Hamlet means to say is that such men as Osric have a "*yesty*" or "superficial" stock of knowledge, which enables them to talk fluently on common and well-known subjects, or to impose upon foolish and unsteady people, who are carried away by every wind of opinion and have no judgment of their own.

NOTE 17.

How this change of foils is brought about is not quite certain. Salvini delighted and surprised the audience, at the first representation he gave of Hamlet, by the graceful manner in which he managed this exchange. After Laertes had hit him he put his hand up to his side, as if he felt the prick of the unbated weapon; then just as Laertes was about to take up his foil, which had been knocked out of his hand in the encounter, Signor Salvini placed his foot on it, and, bowing gracefully, presented his antagonist with his own foil. Graceful as this undeniably is, I do not think it can be justified on a careful consideration of the scene; the action is too deliberate; it is manifest that Hamlet does not stop when he is hit, but that he continues his attack furiously till the point of each foil getting caught in the hilt of the other, both are disarmed; but they do not stop, Hamlet being too eager to hit Laertes; each snatches at the first weapon that comes to his hand, and they continue the struggle, in which Hamlet wounds Laertes. In answer to the objection that Laertes, though struck with the venomed point after Hamlet, when the virulence of the poison might be supposed to have diminished, yet dies the first—it may be observed that Hamlet's wound was probably much the slighter of the two, for in the excited state in which he evidently was, and not knowing he had an unbated weapon in his hand, he would probably strike Laertes much harder than Laertes, knowing the deadly power of the poison, had struck him. Hamlet's words after the scuffle—

Nay, come again—

could hardly have been spoken had he detected Laertes' treachery, or had he been conscious that he was wounded. His mind is, I believe, entirely wrapped up in the trial of skill, for the time being, and his excitement arises from his eagerness to win the match.

SCHEME OF TIME

occupied by the play of "Hamlet," showing, approximately, the intervals between the various Scenes and Acts.

ACT I.

Scene 1.—Night.

INTERVAL OF TWELVE HOURS.

Scene 2.— } Day-time.
Scene 3.— }

INTERVAL OF SOME HOURS.

Scene 4.— } Night.
Scene 5.— }

Time occupied by First Act: Twenty-four hours.

INTERVAL OF ABOUT TWO MONTHS AND A HALF.

ACT II.

Scene 1.— }
Scene 2.— } Day-time. Action consecutive.
Scene 3.— }

INTERVAL OF TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

ACT III.

Scene 1.—Morning.

INTERVAL OF SOME HOURS.

Scene 2.— { Evening } }
Scene 3.— { to } } Action consecutive.
Scene 4.— { night. } }

ACT IV.

Scene 1.— }
Scene 2.— } The same night. The action being consecutive from Act III
Scene 3.— } Scene 2, to Act IV., Scene 4, inclusive.
Scene 4.— }

INTERVAL OF TWO MONTHS.

Scene 5.— }
Scene 6.— } Day-time. Action consecutive.
Scene 7.— }

INTERVAL OF TWO DAYS.

ACT V.

Scene 1.—Day-time.

AN INTERVAL, PERHAPS, OF TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

Scene 2.—Day-time.

END OF PLAY.

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